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Religious Pluralism and Imagination Towards a Postsecular City

Giuseppe Carta

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law

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Abstract

This thesis advances two arguments for rethinking postsecular urbanism. First, it argues that it should be thought as a form of apophatic pluralism, wherein, while every religious or nonreligious group is empowered to find its modes of expression, none of their doctrines can be normative for the whole polity. To think pluralism via apophasis is to conceive space as the coming together of incommensurable monads, set free to search for truths while intermingling one another in the construction of the everyday. The second point is that its epistemic register must be that of imagination, framed as the noetic capacity of relating with the materiality and immateriality of the world. This work upholds that geography must try to pluralize imagination, to open the city to different processes of aesthesis and different conceptions of beauty. The work is composed by five chapters. The first is a theoretical review dedicated to matters of religious pluralism, secularization and secularism, and postsecular theories. The survey suggests that the notion of postsecularism should be redefined on the lines of apophatic pluralism. The second chapter is dedicated to geography of religion. It focuses on how geographical research addresses the materiality/immateriality of religion by looking at its outward and inward dimensions. The third chapter proposes an approach to geography of religion based on imagination, captured in the Aristotelian tradition as reshaped by post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy. It is advanced that the enigma of *nous poietikos* should be let open to different epistemics. In the forth chapter, these arguments are illustrated in reference to the project 'Reimagining the Mosque, Opening the City', a series of public workshops I have planned and coordinated with a number of scholars and Muslim artists in Rome and Bologna, Italy.

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Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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Introduction

During recent decades, pathways for religious pluralism have been extensively scrutinised in political arenas as well as within social sciences and philosophy. Such an attention is certainly boosted by the happenings occurred in the aftermath of 9/11, but has longstanding sociological roots. Migration flows have profoundly altered the spatial distribution of religious groups, disrupting the assumed homogeneity of imagined communities in favour of new patterns of diversity (Woodhead 2016; Knippenberg 2007). Ongoing processes of reterritorialization are mirrored by variations in belief and belonging (Taylor 2007; Bilgrami 2016). The classic theory of secularization, which predicted that modernity and scientific thought would progressively undermine the salience of religion and faith, has been widely demurred (Gorski and Altinordu 2008; Mouzelis 2012). While some have propelled a revision of its central assumptions (Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004), others envisage arrays of desecularization, the resurgence of religion or even the ‘return of the sacred’ (Berger 1999; Morozov 2008). New forms of unstructured religiosity coexist with new orthodoxies and traditionalisms, but also with patterns of nonreligion; these intermingle with movements of social and theological renovation.

Alongside overly represented forms of fundamentalism, other crucial public disputes are consistently moulded around religious motifs – for example those around sexuality, family law, education, and so forth. An analytic enigma for social sciences and commentators, religious diversity challenges the modern approach to public policy, that is, the doctrine of political secularism. In Europe, lights are almost entirely casted on Islam and its supposed incompatibility with modernity and democracy; nonetheless, emerging arrangements of Christian *establishmentarianism* are equally of remarkable importance, testified by the clash over Christian roots in European Constitution Treaty or the public display of confessional symbols in Italy, Germany and France (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Gokariksel 2009). At the same time, contentions involve religious or nonreligious actors against religiously inspired policies – notably same-sex marriage rights (Whitehead 2014; Whitehead and Perry 2016) or bioethics (Beyleveld and Brownsword 2001; Moazam 2006; Brouillet and Turner 2005). How can difference be accommodated? How can the recognition of religious specificities and requirements of social cohesion be balanced? New questions of liberty arise alongside the need to adjust the established political apparatus.

For some social theorists and philosophers, the maintained public salience of religion calls for transforming the epistemic categories of the religious and the real. Many argue for a *postsecular* sensibility,

that is, a radical refashioning of social, political, and existential secularism. Its most essential claim is the need for a renewed dialogue between modern ontologies and metaphysics, rethinking the articulation of transcendence and immanence (Kyrlezhhev 2008). Cognate to postmodern and postcolonial theses, theories of the postsecular can be explained as two-fold: first, they describe a shift in the dialectics between religion and modernity, whereas the subalternity of the former to the latter is increasingly questioned; second, they prompt a counter-hegemonic challenge to totalizing narratives that marginalize the religious in the private (Abeysekara 2008; Huggan 2010). Postsecular theories trigger criticism towards universalistic modern reason, towards antireligious attitudes in society and politics and, ultimately, towards the disenchantment of truth claims as the pre-requirement for accessing the public (Mandair 2012; Rosati 2010). Nevertheless, rather than maintaining for the re-enchantment of the real on confessional foundations, postsecular scholars advocate for a *non-establishmentarian* dialogue between a multiplicity of religious and nonreligious actors. What postsecularism suggests is the development of a form of pluralism animated by “a generous *ethos of engagement* between a plurality of constituencies inhabiting the same territory and honouring different moral sources” (Connolly 1999: 36).

Many seem optimistic about the possibility for a postsecular political theory to contribute to a more egalitarian society in which religious diversity can prosper, or at least, be tolerated. However, more than twenty years after its appearance in the debate (Blond 1998), it is impossible not to observe that principles of postsecularism have only marginally impacted the political. Religion plays a crucial role in world politics, but it can hardly be said that postsecular aims are being achieved: religious knowledge is very often deprecated as medieval and irrational, adversary to scientific thought and a menace to democracy; many religious groups are now, more than ever, being discriminated and stigmatized. New expressions of exclusivism emerge, and blatantly disallow prospects of cohabitation between different knowledges. Some scholars dispute that the field of the postsecular is epistemically opacous and, in reason of such a theoretical frailty, incapable of adequately responding to the mobilization of religious traditions by populist forces (Marzouki et al. 2016; Robbins 2013). Not always coinciding with anti-religious positions but strictly linked with establishmentarian attitudes, of confessional but also of secularist matter, Islamophobia became a prominent factor in world politics during the same years in which the academic debate on postsecularism was flourishing (Massoumi et al. 2017; Gillespie 2014). Islamic theological arrays are under constant scrutiny, while new restrictive regulations on their practice are introduced by policy-making or implicitly enacted in the everyday. Alongside being assimilated to the ideal type of the postsecular city (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Wilford 2013), the contemporary city might appear as a ‘fundamentalist city’, a space in which rights of religious minorities are discarded by explicit or latent forms of marginalization (AlSayyadd 2013).

Establishmentarian uses of the hegemonic religious tradition and the rise of Islamophobia seriously put into question many postsecular assumptions. Is the renewed presence of religion in the public inevitably progressive and animated by love, as many postsecular enthusiasts seem to suggest? How can religious intolerance be fought? Across postsecular theories, a decisive issue is often evaded, that is, whether the epistemic pre-eminence of an historically dominant confession – fed by its spatial, symbolic, and moral legacy – can impact pre-political orientations and values, *ipso facto* hindering postsecular prescriptions for pluralism (Ferrara 2010; McDaniel et al. 2011). The question here is: to what extent do the ways in which the public is thought and enacted respond to the visible and invisible imprinting of the hegemonic framework?

Even though many of the postsecular concerns are *geographical* and specifically urban (McLennan 2011), current literature scarcely investigates whether such an hegemonic framework may affect geographical imagination – and then the ways the city is perceived, thought, lived, and built like. That of geographical imagination, I argue, constitutes a favourable level for observing the interweaving of place-making with the religious-secular articulation – a nexus that in this work I will mainly refer to with the expression ‘grounded theologies’ (Tse 213).

The significance of imagination in geographies of religion has been famously popularized by Edward Said (1979). With the concept of imaginative geography, Said was referring to the discursive devices through which the notion of Orient has been invented and reproduced as *real* – and altogether, that of the West, alongside the epistemic categories of ‘we’ and ‘they’. Supported by disciplines such as anthropology and history, imaginative geographies were revealed for having the precise function of nourishing the idea of *the East*, Asia and Africa, by European elites. Rather than innocent, these images were setting the lenses through which the world was observed and, through that, disposed to conquest. Imaginative geographies were, for Said, tools of domination, used for validating the colonial project and the subordination of extra-European people. Within such a frame, representations of Islam constituted a decisive component. Assumed as a fraudulent version of Christianity, Islam was referred to to “symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians” (59). Orientalism promoted an essentialistic view of Islam, portraying it as homogeneous and immobile to the point that “you can speak about Muslims, modern Islam, and primitive Islam without bothering to make distinctions” (236).

Douglas Pratt (2011) argues that present-day Islamophobia is still rooted upon the same imaginative devices, strengthened by the fact that, now, the timeless life threat of Islam is depicted as a presence insinuating in *our* cities. Such scenarios are made ubiquitous within the everyday life of non-Islamic people by media. In Pratt’s analysis, a common pattern is identified in how media discourse deprives Islam of its spiritual orientation, for rather emphasising aspects of coercion and the anti-modern crudeness of *shari’a* law. Islam is imagined as intrinsically literalist; impermeable to change, Muslims seem trapped in a

perpetual past that calls for violence to be re-enacted. The pervasiveness of this narrative, Pratt argues (2015), is cementing two specular extremisms fighting one another, a fundamentalist Islam and a fundamentalist Christianity.

A paradigmatic case is provided by the conflict over mosques, which constitutes a fundamental issue in contemporary European politics (Morgan 2016). Such a conflict pertains Muslim groups' acts of territorialization, and more specifically, their impact on the shape of the city – on its sensible materiality and on its *image*. Fostered by conservative forces and frequently endorsed by the clergy of the hegemonic religious group, the opposition to the building of new Islamic sacred spaces is recurrently presented as a problem of sensorial displacement, whose main agent would be *visibility* (Göle 2016; Garbin 2013; Díez De Velasco 2010). Its rationale is found in the defence of an inherent 'indigenous religious landscape' which, across Europe, is identified with a 'Christian landscape' (Emmett 2009; Cesari 2005; Astor 2012; Landman and Wessels 2005). Notably, what is formally disputed is the aesthetic contrast between the proposed mosque and the dominant architectural tradition, assumed as native. Often it is the shape or the height of the minaret emerging as the object of strenuous negotiations; in certain cases, such as that of Switzerland, the construction of minarets has been altogether banned after a referendum vote (Mayer 2011; Cheng 2015). At the same time, the presence of urban *musallayat*, Islamic makeshift places of worship, is equally contested for their *invisibility*.

References to endangered local traditions are conveyed by Islamophobic discourses in evocative forms. Alongside vision, the threat of the 'Islamic invasion' is articulated through other sensory registers. Firstly, the auditory. A usual theme is that of *adhan*, the call of prayer recited by the muezzin (Shavit and Spengler 2016; Hirschkind 2006; Perkins 2015). Another is that of human voices and the menacing sound of Arabic language (Soyer 2013). Second, the olfactory, evoked in reference to bodily odours (Aytörk and Mignon 2013) as well as food and kitchen smells (Fiore 2016). That of food, and of taste, represents a particularly prominent vocabulary. On the one hand, anti-discrimination policies in school refectories and hospitals are often framed by anti-Islamic groups and media as the imposition of the cultural norms of the minority to the majority (Thomas and Selimovic 2015; Andreassen and Ahmed-Andresen 2014; Elkman 2015). The 'Islamization' of dietary habits is indicated as symptomatic of an ongoing cultural colonization (Hussein 2015; Padovan and Alietti 2014). On the other, especially in France and Italy, Islamophobic groups have launched campaigns against the consumption of couscous or kebab, paralleled by the revaluation of traditional local food (Cavanaugh 2013; 2007). In some cases, such as the Italian cities of Trieste and Lucca, public administrators forged *ad hoc* policies that virtually banned halal food (Grasso 2010). Protests are often delivered in the form of banquets, where pork meat is provocatively consumed in the next proximity of an Islamic centre (Allievi 2009).

More than for a better understanding of its rationale and expressive modes, to conceive Islamophobia through the framework of imagination suggests strategies for it to be tackled. According to Pratt, in fact, Islamophobia descends to “the twin correlated forces of ignorance and misinformed imagination. If perfect love casts out fear, what is required today is a love of knowledge that counters ignorance and love of truth that informs authentic image” (2011: 383). A similar view is shared by Stefano Allievi (2007), who holds that the only way to evade from the ‘trap’ of the imaginary is to counter Islamophobic imaginaries with *real* knowledge. But how can this task be achieved?

This thesis investigates the relationship between imagination and religious pluralism. Its focus lies on the capacity of images to intervene in our experience of the everyday and address grounded theologies. My argument is that, in order for it to be authentically egalitarian, postsecularism must be emended by a geographical theory centred on imagination. It is only through a renewed attention to imagination, I claim, that postsecularism can support an effective form of pluralism and the project of a postsecular city. Such a contention is two-fold. On the one hand, I hold that imagination is the dimension through which truth claims are formed and apprehended in the lived relation with the materiality and immateriality of existents. On the other, that imagination is the domain in which particularities can dialogue one with another for being, at least temporarily, suspended and de-particularised. The model I am advancing finds its grammatical rule in apophatic pluralism – an arrangement of pluralism based on the principle that, while every truth claim is empowered to find its autonomous modes of expression in imagination, none can be assumed as final and valid for the whole polity. To think pluralism via imagination and apophasis is to conceive space as the coming together of myriad incommensurable monads, all set free to search for truths while intermingling one another in the construction of the everyday.

My framing of imagination and of images exceeds their conventional understanding, which, I argue, is strictly entwined with secular modernity. We are all aware of the fact that the society we inhabit, that of global capitalism, is dominated by images: images produce a spectacle with which we are incessantly committed to participate, sliding from the screens we stare at to the life we live, the modes in which we define and perform our persona, we perceive our desires as well as our deepest regrets, the people we trust and to those we fear. Images are the means by which human beings are socialized, the vehicle that introduces us, before and better than words, to horizons of shared meanings and values. Through images many have been introduced to hate Islam, and Muslims, and to live on their own flesh the sensory displacement these images elicit. Images are social – they belong to nobody and to all of us; in this sense,

they are the more-than-verbal pillars through which the experience of being is performed as being-with (Nancy 2005). Nevertheless, images are never settled once and for all: they transit from place to place, perpetually renewed by new processes of embodiment and signification, by the combination with other images and new performances of imagination. Images are tools of power and domination; at the same time, they can set us free. Rather than stable social constructs that we passively dwell on, images are the most intimate and essential companion we dispose of, alongside our body and our thoughts. More than instrumental to the forging of the collective and for the individual to be socialized, images have an agency in our individual experience of the everyday through our senses and body. Images can be liberating, for they have the capacity to shift our mind from different space-times, to mould the one we crave out of the ones we have encountered in the past and the ones we have in front of us.

Some clarifications are necessary at this point. By images I do not intend only pictorial entities and not only the outcome of distinct acts of seeing. Following the Aristotelian definition coined in *De anima*, images are what remains in one's mind after sense-objects are removed from sense-organs. Images refer to any sense-percept one can obtain during wake or while sleeping, and through mystical experiences: as much as visual images, there are olfactory images, tactual images, auditory images, and taste images. Nonetheless, images are always synesthetical – they refer to entanglements of sense-percepts, for the experience of one is inseparable from that of the others. In this work the taxonomy of the visual will be thus used only metaphorically. Moreover, images are neither representational simulacrum of an outwards reality that can be replicated as such in the space of the mind. They are, diversely, a *reality* by themselves. Such a reality is performative: it is lived in the flesh, and unfolded through the vocabulary provided by sensory experiences, which imagination synthetizes and gives order to; it is thought, activated *in absentia* of its referential sense-object, contemplated as memory or as a recollection. There are mental images, literary images, verbal images, symbolic images, and so forth. Images shape an embodied intuition that stimulates but exceeds discursive reason: “not only do images appear before language, but they are also at times impossible to translate into words ... either because descriptions risk being incomplete or because they may turn into a betrayal of the images” (Bottici 2014: 6). Images are, in other words, the space between sense-percepts and thoughts, between the materiality of the former and the immateriality of the latter. Altogether, and in reason of this, images can be thought as the self-disclosing of the transcendent in the immanent. For various theological traditions across both Islam and Christianity, as it will be discussed, they are in fact the locus in which the unseen is manifest in the seen, the unsayable in the sayable, the hidden (*batin*) in the revealed (*ẓāhir*). For this, they are assumed as the device through which the religious irrupts into the physical world.

As the intermediate capacity linking sense-perception and reason, imagination has often been thought, and deplored, as deceptive. For Chiara Bottici (2014), modern philosophy has weakened the epistemic

potential of imagination through two conceptualizations. The first is that of imagination as a purely individual faculty. In this sense, imagination would be the capacity through which a free subject creates new images *ex nihilo*. Aristotle's *phantasia* is transformed in mere 'fantasy', and thus in 'fancy'. Thinkers such as Bacon or Pascal conceived it as "the sign of the irremediably flawed nature of human beings, of the original sin that prevents us from simply following the sources of truth: reason and the senses" (23). The dualism of the real and the unreal was produced: on the one side, the *real* became equated with whatever can be immediately sensed and experienced in its factual materiality; on the other, the *unreal* became the fictitious, the realm of fantasy. According to this, the domain of the former would be scientific thought and rationality, while the latter would habit the register of imagination, which here coincides with that of art and play – an understanding that would become hegemonic with Romanticism.

The second approach swings imagination from fantasy to 'the imaginary'. Through this move,

“... the Imaginary becomes a structure constitutive of our being, the context we are immersed in: far from being the autonomous subjects that are presupposed by modern theories of imagination, posited as an individual faculty, the underlying idea is that we are captivated and thus constituted by the imaginary in which we live. Simply put, if imagination is an individual faculty that we possess, the imaginary is the context that possesses us” (37).

This approach is used by authors such as Charles Taylor (2004), Cornelius Castoriadis (2005), Edward Said, and Derek Gregory (1994). In short, these authors claim that the imaginary is a performative set of symbolic constructions resulting from and reproducing collective acts of imagination. Through images, the social is instituted as a socio-historical apparatus; subjectivity, accordingly, is determined by the internalization of such a social world. The role of the philosopher, and of the social scientist, would be that of unveiling the cogency of power relations and the social imaginary, in order to emancipate the individual from ideologies.

According to Bottici, if the first approach is founded on a philosophy of the subject, imagination as social imaginary lies on a metaphysics of the context. Her critique is that, while the former is incapable of understanding the social, the latter fails to explain individuals' free imagination. Both of them, furthermore, would be sceptical towards imagination: for both it is the locus of alienation, an escape from the *real world* that need to be supplemented, or even obliterated, by *real knowledge*.

Bottici argues for a third approach, integrating and correcting the two. This finds inspiration in Henry Corbin's notion of the *imaginal*, drawn from an extensive reading of post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy, specially of Ibn 'Arabi's creative imagination. Rather than a gateway towards the unreal, the imaginal allows making sense of our bodily encounter with the world as mediated by images. Corbin's framing, however, is dominated by a very specific theological urge that Bottici does not subscribe. In his work, in

fact, imagination is the capacity of participating to a perpetual creation unfolding itself through the manifestation of images; this cosmogonic capacity is shared by the creator, an utterly transcendental divinity, with the creatural, that actualizes the ontological union between the materiality of the inhabited world and the immateriality of the Absolute, self-disclosed upon a plurality of loci of manifestation. For Bottici, today's scholars should benefit of the notion of the imaginal by using it in a restricted sense, for referring to "something that can be potentially visualized, even if it is not actually so" (61). For modernity does not need theology, she holds, the field of the imaginal needs to be circumscribed to the individual and social life of images. While for Corbin and his Islamic philosophers the imaginal is inseparable to the realm of cosmology, Bottici's theory is instead moved by the attempt to "deontologize it ... The imaginal is not a world, but it is what makes a world possible in the first place" (*ibidem*). Once post-Avicennan's imagination is desecrated, Corbin's account is flattened "in the immanence of the unconscious production of images" (60).

Ultimately, Chiara Bottici suggests that creative imagination should be secularized for better responding to the challenges posed by secular politics of imagination. The aim of this work, instead, is to demonstrate that we need to desecularize the political through imagination and to pluralize imagination through apophasis. To do so would be, coherently, to desecularize and pluralize both perception, *aisthesis*, and reason, *nous*. While I agree with Bottici on the necessity to fulfil the gap between imagination as an individual faculty and imagination as social imaginary, I do not think imagination should be deprived of its capacity to approach the ontological. On the contrary, I argue that Corbin's notion of creative imagination can instead provide the means through which geographical epistemology may approach the religious and rethink diversity.

The thesis is composed by four chapters. The first three are of theoretical nature and aim to build the core argument of the work: the necessity to refashion postsecular theories through a geography of religion grounded on imagination. The first is dedicated to a literature review on postsecular theories, and examines various modes to epistemically accommodate a multiplicity of competing truth claims. The survey aims at understanding the postsecular conundrum with religious diversity, while arguing for reframing postsecularism through apophatic pluralism. The chapter is divided in three parts. The first is dedicated to the articulation of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in philosophy of religions; at the same time, it introduces the essential characters of apophatic pluralism. It will pay specific attention to three authors, John Hick, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Kenneth Rose. The second part analyses theories of secularization, secularism and postsecularism across philosophy and the social sciences. Two authors will be analysed in-depth, Jürgen Habermas and John Milbank. Their work will be commented in reference to apophasis, thanks to the philosophy of the unsayable proposed by William Franke. The third part discusses the notion of the postsecular city, and in particular the work of geographers such as Paul Cloke,

Justin Beaumont, Andrew Williams and Chris Baker. My contention is that their work, due to its cataphatic approach, is ambiguously inclusivist and theologically prescriptive. The project of the postsecular city, I argue, requires instead the dismissal of any *strong* criteria for religious knowledge to access the public. This can be achieved precisely through a renewed emphasis on imagination.

The second chapter deals with geography of religion and its epistemologies. The analysis concerns the modes through which geographical knowledge accounts religion and engages with its paradox – the tensions between visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality, immanence and transcendence. The first section is dedicated to the epistemic principles of geography of religion, with a specific attention on how it grasps the relations between religion, the environment, and the secular. The second section is dedicated to the notion of sacred space. In particular, it will discuss Mircea Eliade's notion of hierophany, by putting it in dialogue with postmodern discontents and Justin Tse's proposition for rethinking geography of religion through grounded theologies. The third and last section of the chapter presents three different ways of conceiving the religious landscape – the morphological, the postmodern, and the non-representational. My argument is that geographical knowledge needs to be desecularized by moving out from the binary opposition between body and mind. The key for such a move, I suggest, must be found in imagination.

The third chapter is focused on theories of imagination. Rather than fictional and deceptive, imagination is here assumed as a noetic capacity intermediate to the self-disclosing of the world and intellect, between sense-perception and the formation of the discursive field. Distinctive of apophatic theology, such a connotation is captured by the Aristotelian tradition as reshaped by post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy. The first part of the chapter introduces Aristotle's theory of imagination, as articulated in the treatises *De anima* and *Parva Naturalia*. The second illustrates various interpretations of Aristotle's concept of *nous poietikos*, active intellect. I will focus on Greek and Islamic Peripatetic philosophy, from Alexander of Aphrodisia and Themistius, to al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. This move aims at emphasising the divarication of two opposite approaches, the rationalistic and the esoteric: rather than suggesting that geography must embrace either one or the other, I hold that their dialogue must be revived and its outcome left open. The third part will expand the esoteric reading through Suhrawardi's philosophy of illumination and Ibn 'Arabi's theophanic imagination. By making use of Henry Corbin's work, I argue that creative imagination provides a decisive epistemic resource for desecularizing geographical approaches to religion and pluralizing the postsecular.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to a series of planning workshops on Islamic sacred spaces I have organized, set and led in both Bologna and Rome, Italy. By collating participatory planning and traditional Islamic sacred arts, these workshops made use of imagination and apophatic pluralism for modelling a device for conflict management and resolution. Open to Muslim and non-Muslim participants, the

workshops had two scopes: first, to create a space for stimulating participants' imagination with a number of images on Islamic theology and sacred arts – architecture, poetry, and plastic arts; second, to provide a platform for discussing strategies for religious pluralism at the level of the urban. The chapter presents the theoretical principles and methodology of the workshops. Altogether, it discusses principles of postsecular planning and reflects on the possibilities for implementing such an approach in other contexts.

I would like to conclude this introduction by briefly discussing matters of positionality. Overall, the aim of this thesis is to propose a geographical approach capable of better coping with religious diversity; altogether, this work proposes a rationale for social scientists to have a voice in the public debate on pluralism. My research perspective intermingles with personal motivations. Ethical preoccupations precede my academic interests: that of challenging both Islamophobia and fundamentalism, to tackle establishmentarian attitudes in politics, and to depurate postsecularism from any epistemic confessionalism, however benevolent or subtle. My research agenda is moved by decolonial concerns: the rise of establishmentarian populism calls for decentering our epistemologies through pluriversality. My personal position is that of the agnostic; nevertheless, through the course of my research I have been fascinated, and moved, by Islam and Islamic philosophy. If the reason why I decided in first place to focus on Islamic philosophy was that of making use of the internal resources for pluralism it holds, the research has taught me that the cognitive marginalization of Islamic communities and of Islamic thought is so deeply ingrained in our everyday that to research on it requires an additional involvement. Primarily, it requires to enhance our criticism towards secular reason and the primacy of secular epistemics dominating the field within which I am moving – that of social sciences and human geography. Every academic is obliged to cope with multiple identities: the researcher, the individual, and the activist. Problems of positionality are even more complex when dealing with religious issues, and even more when accessing the religious through the notions of apophysis and that of *homo religiosus* – for these imply that every discourse on the real is intrinsically a theology. To do human geography, ultimately, is always to give voice to a specific, if implicit, theological discourse. My ambition has been that of advancing a theology perpetually opening itself to, allowing and favoring, a multiplicity of other theologies.

When I initiated the research I am presenting, I was motivated uniquely by political aims, and by intellectual curiosity. As I moved into its folds, I started being profoundly challenged by the terms it was posing, that is, the intertwining of the epistemological and metaphysics. Right now, I can say with certainty that I will not be able to say enough.

I

Religious pluralism, postsecularism, and the imagining of a just city

1. Introduction

This chapter surveys the interdisciplinary literature on religious diversity, with a particular attention on the interrelations between Christianity, Islam, and secularity. It does so by looking at theories on pluralism, secularization, and postsecularism. By *pluralism* I refer to the various views on how accommodating competing truth claims brought in the public realm by a multiplicity of actors, religious or nonreligious. With *secularization* I indicate both a process of social differentiation and the cognate sociological hypothesis which, in its classic formulation, predicts that the importance of religion would progressively decline alongside the rationalization of society and the progress of scientific thought – a theory foundational to modern sociology that has recently been profoundly reshaped. Similarly, I refer to secularism as a body of approaches to religion-nonreligion relationships which advocates that pluralism can be guaranteed only through the secularization of politics and the social, that is, only when the public sphere is freed from any reference to religious doctrines and rendered epistemically neutral towards them. With *postsecularism* I invoke a heterogeneous body of theories that, by operating at the epistemic and normative level, variously contest both the heuristic validity of the theory of secularization and the suitability of secularist precepts.

Emerged in the last two decades across philosophy, theology, and social sciences, postsecularism seems particularly suitable to a context of increasing religious diversity precisely because it is able to establish a unified framework for both making sense of the persistence of the religious in modernity and for forging more equitable policy-making practices that include religion as a legitimate source for the defining of the common good. Religions, postsecularism argues, are here to stay. Since their formulations are of inherent relevance, rather than privatizing them, the public needs to be able to receive their contribution. Nonetheless, as the solutions proposed by postsecular scholars significantly diverge on quite substantial matters, the association of current postsecular approaches with pluralism requires critical evaluation. The questions I reply to in this chapter are: How does the postsecular assess his response to matters of religious diversity? Under what conditions can the postsecular address religious discrimination?

The spatial lens through which the articulation of these concepts will be observed is that of the city. The city is in fact the space in which religious diversity is produced and emerges. At the same time, the city is where theological and philosophical predicates can profitably interact and dialogue or clash and collide. Thought as the domain in which a multiplicity of conceptions of the real and the social cohabit for finding

expression as spatial demands, the city is the locus wherein principles and pragmatics of pluralism are needed the most (Oosterbaan 2014). If academics are today increasingly aware of postsecular challenges and opportunities, is the city we inhabit capable of endorsing postsecular ethics? *Is our city already postsecular?* Across the diverse understandings in social sciences, philosophy and theology this review discusses the conceptualization of the postsecular advanced by human geographers (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Cloke 2011; Cloke and Beaumont 2012; Williams 2014). I will argue that such geographical understandings fail to respond adequately to the core of problems introduced by the postsecular, namely, the quest for a just city in which diverse religious and nonreligious visions can harmonically coexist and flourish. Ultimately, the chapter proposes some strategies in virtue of which the multireligious city can better express postsecular ideals while rejecting establishmentarianism, be it of the religious or nonreligious variety.

I hold that, for being fully pluralist, postsecularism must find its grammatical rule in apophatic principles, that is, in a philosophy that maintains the epistemic *impossibility* of positively affirming any truth claim as final or normative for the whole humankind. The rationale for apophatic pluralism is rooted in a critique of the limits of language in expressing religious knowledge and more generally of discursive reason. Accordingly, religion is ontologically the articulation of the unsayable, an articulation that is partial by nature; from this perspective, every religious doctrine is a transitory approximation towards a reality that cannot ever be fully grasped by discursive reason. Rather than dismissing the finality and universality of religious truths, it says that none of their doctrinal arrangements should constitute the sole source for legislation. Apophatic pluralism provides stronger bases than affirmative postsecularism precisely because it perpetually tries to be self-reflexive about the positionalities from which it enunciates its propositions. What religious diversity requires, as many scholars argue, is legal pluralism; my point is that its ever-moving centre must be thought as apophatic. More radical than secular doctrine of mere neutrality, apophatic pluralism postulates a nonsubstantive openness towards a plurality of incommensurable worldings as the only suitable strategy for posing interreligious dialogue and building a just city in cooperation. Rather than by the means of positive language – this argument will be extensively discussed throughout the following chapters – apophatic theology can be proficiently enacted only by cultivating another epistemic register and sensibility, that of imagination. It is only through an apophatic pluralism attentive to the noetic character of imagination, I contend, that postsecular theory can vigorously expunge any exclusivist or inclusivist trait and better contribute to the enactment of pluralism.

The chapter is organised in four sections. The first presents the debate around interreligious dialogue in theology (Swidler 2015; Pratt 2007a). On the one hand, it clarifies its taxonomy and proceedings, by

illustrating the triple categorization of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism; on the other, it introduces the thesis of Kenneth Rose on apophatic pluralism (2013).

The second section interprets secularization and secularism in reference to religious diversity. Preliminarily it highlights how authors such as Peter Berger (1967) and Harvey Cox (1965) suggest a causal correlation between the compresence of conflicting truth claims in the urban space and the decline of religiosity. According to these scholars, religious diversity has the critical effect of producing a crisis of plausibility, engendering scepticism and prompting the individualization of belief, phenomena that they connote as the 'end of religion'. Hereafter I compare these understandings with more recent accounts depicting the classic theory of secularization, rather than as a neutral analytical assumption, as a normative prescription and a self-fulfilling prophecy advanced by secularity. Through the work of José Casanova (1994), Charles Taylor (2004; 2007) and Talal Asad (1993; 2003), among others, the review shows how, instead of becoming irrelevant, religiosity can instead be revitalised by diversity while radically transformed in its expressions. I will then elucidate another sociological take on the relations between secularization and religious diversity, represented by research on nonreligion (Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016).

The third part of the chapter is dedicated to the notion of the postsecular. On one side it considers Habermas' communicative strategy for including religious claims of validity within liberal deliberative procedures. My critique to Habermas' discursive ethics will develop three arguments, claiming that it is structurally fragile when dealing with radical religious diversity, scarcely attentive to matters of power relations and, finally, epistemically incapable of hearing what religions really have to say, that is, the 'unsayable'. On the other side it focuses on the thought of John Milbank, pre-eminent proposer of Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank et al. 1999; Žižek and Milbank 2009). As it will be shown, this branch of postsecularism is founded on a vehement critique of secularism – of secularism as a way of epistemically defining religion as the opposite of the secular, of secularism as a methodology in social sciences, and of secularism as a political strategy for granting pluralism at the political level. In turn Milbank's theology will be criticized for its denial of pluralism in favour of an inclusivist approach that attributes a vestigial role to Christianity (Milbank 1990). With William Falke (2014), I maintain that postsecularism needs to be sustained by the nonfoundational and nonconfessional principle of apophasis.

The fourth and final section analyses the geographical research on the postsecular city, focused on the role played by Faith-Based Organizations in neoliberal contexts. I will suggest that, for the postsecular to adequately respond the quest for a just city, it is of paramount importance to fully abandon exclusivist and inclusivist approaches and to rather operate at the level of the 'unsayable' as it is felt, that is, in the intermediate space of the imaginative.

2. Interreligious dialogue and apophatic pluralism

The problem around the compatibility of religious formulations, be it posed on the level of doctrines or of practices, has comprised a crucial point of discussion within theology, for giving origin to various orientations. The reason for such a scholarly divarication lies in the epistemic difficulties of the enterprise. To study the doctrines of a religious system different from one's own is a complex effort that requires the hermeneutic capability of stepping out of one's own horizon of significance. What is particularly demanding is in fact to resolve the epistemic tension between the familiarity of the system one inhabits and the irremediable oddness constituted by a diverse kind. Ultimately, "one of the main challenges ... is in locating a proper balance between commitment to one's own religion while maintaining openness to the other" (Moyaert 2012: 25).

One of the primary angles from which theology has looked at interreligious dialogue is the soteriological, which compares how different religious systems articulate their doctrines of salvation – in what aspects they differ, what they share, how similarities are expressed, and whether they are accurate or not when providing means for salvation. The importance of such a reflection exceeds the boundaries of soteriology and integrates two correlated themes. The first is authentically theological, since what is under debate is the future of every religious system, the potential for hybridization, syncretism, decline or survival. The second transcends theology and has a substantial implication for social sciences and political theory: by discussing the pathways for comparing religious theological and doctrinal standings, what is ultimately at stake is the possibility of interreligious dialogue itself and, through that, the possibility for people of different religion to cohabit the same space and fruitfully cooperate for the shaping of the common good. To fully engage in an authentic interreligious confrontation requires, first, that the interlocutors are disposed to mutually recognize one another. Moreover, they need to share the setting for evaluating their claims – in other words, they need to agree about the expected output of the dialogue and on what is the likely use they can make of it. Rather than innocent, the diverse modalities through which the recognition of religious diversity is accounted institute the pre-conditions for the encounter between competing claims to happen, in first place, and for it to address everyday interreligious cohabitation (Bader 2003).

2.1 *Exclusivism*

The canonical way of framing interreligious dialogue is the threefold categorization of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This was introduced by Alan Race (1982) and since then has become dominant within theology and philosophy of religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2005; Dijkhuizen 2015). *Exclusivism* is the position according to which only one religion contains the means of salvation; while this is final, universal and utterly true, all the others are false beliefs incapable of responding to any ultimate question. The typical proposition from which exclusivism proceeds is that one's religion is by nature the sole authentic expression of divine revelation, while other religions' prophets are false ones. This proposition evolves

from the conviction that the member of the one ‘true’ religion is qualified to understand contents and deficiencies of another body of religious teachings better than its own affiliates – most likely, this is assumed to be the case precisely because the exclusivist is able to objectively discern other creeds from the vantage-point of a true religious teaching. Exclusivism has long been adopted by most of the organized religions. In Catholicism, for example, the principle of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (‘no salvation outside of the Church’) has been embraced by most of its fathers, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, and officially rejected by the Catholic Church only with the Council Vatican II (1962-65). Nevertheless, exclusivism is still supported by many religious individuals but also across various conservative groups within Protestantism and Islam, and by many atheists.

Douglas Pratt (2007b) distinguishes three orientations within the spectrum of exclusivism. The first is open exclusivism, represented for example by the likes of Karl Barth: the open exclusivist is available to commit in interreligious dialogue activities with members of other religious traditions, but maintains that such activities essentially aim at the capitulation of the other. The second is closed exclusivism: from this point of view, “the ‘other’ may be acknowledged as having its rightful place, but that place is inherently inferior to that of the closed exclusivist who, *inter alia*, prefers to remain wholly apart from the other” (297). The differences between open and closed exclusivism is pronounced. “An ‘open’ exclusivism may yet entertain a ‘dialogue’ of sorts – perhaps a conversational interaction – if only with a view to understanding the perspective of the other in order, then, better to refute it and so proclaim the ‘Only One Right’ religion. By comparison, a ‘closed’ exclusivism will spurn interaction with another religious viewpoint altogether: imperialist assertion is the only mode of communication possible” (297-298). The third orientation is extreme exclusivism: here the religious other is conceived as an enemy, whose mere presence must be strenuously resisted and opposed. Extreme exclusivism can be identified with forms of religious extremism such as terrorism but also with less martial but equally ferocious forms of cultural war – for example the kind promulgated by actors of the Islamophobic front (Massoumi et al. 2017).

2.2 *Inclusivism*

Inclusivism is the position according to which, while all religions may contain some valid traits, only one religion is depositary of absolute truth. The typical inclusivist rhetoric says that “there are religions/ideologies that contain *some* of the means of salvation, but *my* religion includes *all* of those means” (Swidler 2015: 198). While exclusivism is by nature evangelical in sitting conversion as the sole aim of dialogue, whenever this is admitted as possible, inclusivism is more authentically appreciative of the possibility of theological interchange. If different religions differently dispose of means of salvation, the assumption from which inclusivism proceeds is that there is substantial unity between humankind; all religions aspire to conduct their people towards the same destination, that is, salvation. However, despite such an epistemic openness, inclusivism assumes the vocabulary and categories of the ‘true’

religious tradition as the setting through which evaluating the others'. As argued by Moyaert (2015: 31), "inclusivism is essentially hierarchical. The 'truth' of the other religious tradition is true only insofar as it agrees with or confirms one's own truth. The tension between oneself and the other is shown here as a tension between the universal (all-encompassing) and the particular ... Inclusivism includes the other but likewise robs the self of a sense of her own strangeness and thus of her unique singularity". One can criticize inclusivism for it is naively paternalistic in its benign forms, and colonialist in its muscular version. While the religious other is not necessarily an enemy but someone we can at least *tolerate*, we anyway cannot but try and convince him to emend his doctrine, for his own sake.

Hegemonic across Christian theologians, inclusivism is also the official position embraced by the Catholic Church after the Vatican Council II, endorsed in both theological dialogue and in diplomatic relations – especially with Islamic leaders. As emphasised by Pratt (2010: 258), "despite continued affirmation of the Church's respect for other religions ... the missionary and evangelistic imperative tends ever to predominate. Wherever there is dialogue, there is also proclamation: the mission of salvific announcement forms the default horizon within which, for the most part, dialogical engagements take place". Furthermore, of inclusivist nature are also those models that balance the preservation of an official state religion and religious liberties at individual and group level (Modak-Truran 2007; Dressler 2010).

2.3 *Pluralism: John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

The third position is pluralism. While exclusivism and inclusivism are jointly considered as gradations of confessionalism, for both pose a specific confession over the others while understanding these from the point of view of their preferred confession, pluralism rejects the idea that any religion can be intrinsically superior. On the contrary, for the pluralist competing religious traditions can be equally correct despite their claims being formally contradictory one with another. Its essential thesis is that different religions are nothing but differently articulated replies that the humankind elaborates to similar sets of ultimate questions – such as "does life have meaning, and, if so, what is it? How should we live so as to realize that meaning? Where did we, and everything else, come from? What happens after we die?" (Swidler 2015: 199). If doctrines diverge, pluralism alleges, this is due to two main reasons: the first is that revelation has been contingently unfolded in different ways to different people, in order for them to be able to access it by the means of their own intellect and culture, in a specific time and a specific place; the second is that languages vary to the point that discursive reason is not able at any extent to fully comprehend and articulate the mystery of revelation and of being. Nevertheless, the pluralist affirms that different doctrines are united by a substantial agreement on the subject matter, an ineffable ultimate reality they all speculate on and approximate towards. This is perpetually disclosing itself in a multiplicity of forms, whose commonalities should be explored through interreligious dialogue.

The main advocate of the pluralist position is John Hick, whose contribution has been defined as a Copernican Revolution (1973; 1980). The significance of such a shift is rejecting the absolutization of any specific doctrinal truth; in particular, since Hick himself is a Christian who speaks from the point of view of Christianity, it points at discarding any contention for the intrinsic superiority and *uniqueness* of Christianity towards any other religious teachings (Hick and Knitter 1987). Christianity, Hick holds, cannot be the epicentre of the universe of faiths, as Christian theology extensively maintained; this is instead the divine, an ineffable noumenical reality differently thought and experienced by different people through the intermediation of different phenomenal forms. His proposition is that of a theo-centric pluralism, in which all religions orbit around a fully transcendental divine principle: whereas all religions are unified in their attempts to come to terms with the transcendental divine, yet religions' teachings are only able to catch its impermanent representation, accordingly to the means acquired through the worldly experience. In the words of Hick (1980: 52), the divine “is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways”.

More than a tool for mutual understanding, this arrangement of pluralism considers interreligious dialogue as a stage for religions to renovate and improve their theological repertoire. Interreligious dialogue, Hick continues, offers the possibility for *all* religions to be mutually enriched through theological confrontation and to be transformed through a positive integration of different doctrinal gradients, which are ultimately diverse modes for trying to assert the same truth. Hick maintains for the cooperative status of theology (1997). In his view interreligious dialogue is an open field, in which even nonreligious people can be profitably engaged:

“Pluralism is thus not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions. Its logical status as a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. And so the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition, but invites them to try to produce a better explanation of the data” (163).

The need for a pluralistic approach to dialogue, Hick argues, derives from two arguments. The first is epistemic: as the adherence to a religious teaching is inescapably contingent, inherited, an “accident of birth” (2005: 2), the increased awareness of the variability of religious doctrines we have today demands us to question any pretention of uniqueness. Therefore, we need to question ourselves and our own religion by dialoguing and learning one from another. The second responds to motivations of practical reason: as religious diversity is nowadays a condition experienced on the everyday basis for the wide majority of the world population, and as “we all live together in the same city” (2), we need to develop

some sort of mutual understanding between different creeds. This must inevitably be produced by an ethic of mutual recognition and a shared vocabulary – paving a theological common ground.

Interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam, for example, might build a bridge of reciprocal curiosity and mutual understanding between neighbours led on equivalent paths to salvation. However, enormous difficulties are represented by the fact that the two are equipped with remarkably different and often incongruous theological arrangements – one of which, for example, about Jesus Christ being either the divine incarnation on earth or one of the prophets. For Hick, the solution can be sought on a deeper level, that of a reality “beyond the scope of human description and understanding” (13). On this, he eventually finds doctrinal correspondences in the ways different thinkers such as the Catholic Thomas Aquinas and the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi address the divine: such analogies would constitute the basis for dialogue as well as the prospect towards which theologies would be harmonized. This method, Hick argues, would also be extended to Jewish thinkers of the likes of Maimonides, or to Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

But is it ever possible to build a common ground and even radical agreement on such proceedings? And at what expense? Many have contested Hick’s proposition by objecting that it establishes nothing but a form of crypto-exclusivism, whose pretention of neutrality would instrumentally cover the imposition of a specific form of syncretic religion, Hick’s religion (Howard-Snyder 2017). This critique has been famously advanced by Gavin D’Costa (1990: ix), according to whom the pluralist project “operate[s] in a curiously absolutist fashion, proposing to incorporate religions on the system’s own terms rather than on terms keeping with the self-understanding of the religions”. In other words, since not every discourse on the real may constitute a religion and not every claim can be admitted as true, Hick is superficial when considering the incompatibility of religious peculiarities and contradictory towards his *own* pretention of neutrality, as he naturalizes the criteria through which attributing the status of religion to a specific body of teachings by selecting certain traits as valid while others as not. Hick’s proposition of a transcendental Real as the coalescence of a plurality of religious claims is not applicable, it is maintained, if not by making epistemic violence to religious traditions’ cohesiveness and to their irreducible difference (Donovan 1993). As a neutral point of view on the plurality of religious manifestations is not achievable, D’Costa holds (1993; 1996), the whole pluralist project has to be rejected as a liberal rearrangement of exclusivism.

Whether one can believe or not in the genuineness of Hick’s drive towards self-critical ecumenical interchange, D’Costa’s critique is a substantial one and poses serious concerns about the practicability of pluralist dialogue as a whole. To what extent is the pluralist prerogative for the universality of religious phenomena favouring certain specific views over others and normatively imposing its own take around what religion is and should be? The dilemma for a pluralist, as it is well acknowledged even by Hick himself, is then represented by balancing claims of universality and the particularity of religious doctrines. Various accounts have been provided by pluralists for accounting the search for common ground and

religions' phenomenal incompatibility (Ruhmkorff 2013). Huang (1995) identifies two main models approaching this dilemma. On the one side, the universalists highlight the substantial unity of all religions, conceived as different expression of a common essence they all express by their own means. This view is that of John Hick. On the other side, we instead have the particularists, who, by considering religious systems as inherently irreducible one to the other, evade the search for common ground as simplistic and reductionist, incapable of rendering the originality of the religious other's claims. Still, differently from confessionalists, particularists theorize that, first, different religions might share something, even if not on a doctrinal level, and that, second, the incompatibility of their phenomenal expressions does not preclude the possibility for the mutual recognition of their soteriological validity. On the contrary, it is maintained, open dialogue between different traditions requires the pre-conditional recognition of incommensurable difference.

A distinguished proponent of the particularist orientation is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim philosopher commonly ascribed to the Perennialist or traditionalist branch alongside the likes of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon (Lings and Minnaar 2007). According to Nasr, diversity of religion, or as he says, the multiplicity of sacred forms, must be motivated not only by diversity of language and culture, by the fact that the same message is conveyed in different exterior forms across different geographical contexts. To consider only this explanation would mean, for Nasr, to reduce the religious to its exteriority, that is, to its historical manifestation. Diversely, religious teachings are differently articulated because divine revelation, despite being universal, has been consigned in different forms to different prophets – a principle, Nasr contends, that has scriptural foundation, since it is enunciated by the Qur'an that "for every nation there is a messenger" (10:48). To state the universality of the contents of prophecy is to affirm the "universality of tradition, of religion. It means that all orthodox religions come from Heaven and are not man made. It also implies by its comprehensive formulation the presence of Divine revelation not only in the Abrahamic Tradition but among all nations" (Nasr 2000: 78). Every religious form finds its own centre in the divine, which Nasr refers to as the 'Absolute'; at the same time, it is entirely contained within the all-comprehending perimeter of the divine. Rather than at the doctrinal level, as in Hick's understanding, for Nasr one needs to search for the unity of all religions in their dependency from the Absolute, as this is the common origin of every prophetic message. By looking at religious diversity from this perspective, Nasr asserts that every sacred form is essentially "a confirmation of the universality of the Truth and the infinite creative power of the Real that unfolds Its inexhaustible possibilities in worlds of meaning which, although different, all reflect the unique Truth" (1989: 281).

Nasr's conceptualization moves from a distinction, rooted in the Qur'anic tradition, between the principle and its manifestations, substance and its accidents, the inward (*batin*) and the outward (*ẓahir*), the unseen

(*ghayb*) and the seen (*shahada*). The universality of the religious, ontologically located within the *ghayb*, needs to be distinguished from the particularity of religions, its *shahada*, since every sacred form is contingent in its phenomenological aspects. It profoundly differs from other sacred forms for what concerns its articulation of doctrine and method, as it is the interweaving of these that constitutes the pure essence of its own message. As such, religions are for Nasr united through the Absolute while at the same time irremediably incommensurable one to the other in their exteriority: “the content of all the expressions of doctrine is the Truth which each formulation expresses from a certain point of view” (2000: 132). If all of them inquire the relationships between man and divinity, the creator and its creatures, differences are ascribed by the fact that “each religion emphasizes a certain aspect of this relationship” (2). Every prophet, then,

“... is a manifestation of the Supreme Logos and *the* Logos, its sacred book a particular manifestation of the supreme book ... and *the* sacred book, its theological and dogmatic formulation of the nature of the Divinity and the Divinity as such ... Each revelation is in fact the manifestation of an archetype which represents some aspect of the Divine Nature. Each religion manifests on earth the reflection of the Divine Nature. Each religion manifests on earth the reflection of an archetype at whose heart resides the Divinity Itself. The total reality of each tradition, let us say Christianity or Islam, as it exists metahistorically and also as it unfolds throughout its destined historical life, is none other than what is contained in that archetype. It is the difference in these archetypes which determines the difference of character of each religion” (1989: 294-95).

Nasr holds that all religion are absolute within their own world; if we look at them from a wider perspective they are yet relatively absolute, since the absolute is only the *ghayb*, the Absolute. The analogy of the sun and the light it emanates is here presented in a radically different strain from Hick's: rather than a universe with a sole sun that differently irradiates its rays upon a common world, for Nasr the multiplicity of sacred forms can be paralleled with a multiplicity of universes, of different suns and different planets. The fact that we acknowledge the existence of other stars and planetary systems does not entail that we do not look at the sun as our own. To know that “each solar system has its own sun, which is both a sun and *the* Sun” (292) does not make our sun less real or unique; nonetheless, it can make us wonder and provide us the sensitivity to intuitively reflect on how other solar systems might work. But how?

For Nasr, “the meaning of each sacred form” is accessible only within the boundaries “of the spiritual universe to which it belongs, without either denying the significance of such forms on their own level or remaining bound to the world of forms as such”. Beyond these forms there is a “formless Essence” that constitutes the inner core of all religions notwithstanding their exterior differentiations (298). How can

we then know religion? How can we get to know the religious other? Various modes are evaluated. For Nasr, positive sciences based on sociological, anthropological, historical or phenomenological methods, either realist or non-realist, despite their aptitude at collecting a significant amount of data, are incapable of penetrating the inner meaning of religious phenomena. This is due to the fact that they reduce the religious to the exoteric, that is, to its mere outward manifestation. At the same time, we must be equally critical of ecumenical synthesis, of those focused on bodily practices or on the doctrinal, such as Hick's. An approach that would obliterate religious diversity for pursuing their unification is to be refused, as it would disperse the only available means for dialogue. According to Nasr "there is nothing more meaningless and even pernicious than to create a syncretism from various religions with a claim to universality while in reality one is doing nothing less than destroying the revealed forms which alone make the attachment of the relative to the Absolute, of man to God, possible" (2000: 2-3). The particularist approach portrayed by Nasr, differently from Hick's, affirms instead that we cannot access different religions' messages other than from within the integral unity of their doctrinal *and* methodical apparatus – wherein the emphasis should be posed on the coming together of the theological and the experiential rather than on one or the other pole. Which means that the underlying unity of religions cannot be found in the contingent similarities their theological teachings might have, as Hick believes, but only on what can be experienced through the contemplative practice of a fully religious life. What Nasr is arguing for is not mere mysticism, but a *scientia sacra*, a resacralization of knowledge that vigorously argue for the compresence of *batin* and *zahir* – and through that, only through that, of the different sacred forms.

Even though both of them are connoted as pluralist, Hick and Nasr diverge significantly. Aslain (2004) highlights their disagreement as follows: for the universalist "pluralism is 'truth' and therefore religions must modify their truth to the truth of pluralism by making substantial revisions of their theological tenets". For the particularist, since truth coincides with that of any revealed religions, "what we must do is to be humble before such 'truth' and accept without seeking to change it. Our duty, Nasr would say, is not to invent truth but to be transparent before truth and reflect it as it is" (xxii). Hick's claim that, in order to enact interreligious confrontation, one needs to abide that his own religion is not final and not universal is surely controversial and largely unrealistic. Religions have all the rights to conceive their own truth as final and universal, and so many of them do – such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Moreover, religious doctrines are only accidentally intertwined one to the other – for example through Neoplatonism, which has been *one* of the languages that for historical reasons were available to early Christian, Islamic, and Jewish theologians. And they are self-sufficient and cohesively organised, to the point that believers would hardly feel the necessity of them being supplemented by other theologies. Nasr's view is also of limited use, for at least two good reasons. The first is that *scientia sacra* can only be in the disposition of few – and specifically, of the expert mystic who has attained a wide religious

education from an in-depth study of traditional sources. The second is that, by limiting its gaze to revealed religions, the traditionalists cut out non-revealed religions. At the same time, they demand the nonreligious person to accept preliminary basic truth claims that explicitly contrasts with their own, ex. of the existence of an absolute real beyond the world of bodies. A common critique that can be made to both the universalist and particularist approach is that they both are elitist: they promise paths for interreligious dialogue and understanding but then they circumscribe these to a narrow circle of specialists.

2.4 *Apophatic pluralism*

A more effective option can be inspired by what universalists and particularists share. Both approaches, in fact, are animated by a critique to discursive reason. They both, even if through very different means, state that religious teachings are unable to fully capture the level of reality they try to provide access to. Language is limited, and so is the understanding we can grasp of it when living in the world of bodies. Both universalist and particularist approach, in other words, seem to converge in giving preference to principles of apophatic or negative theology – a longstanding modality of talking about the first principle whose fundamental claim is that we are unable to affirm its characters and that, consequentially, all we can say about it is *what it is not*. Transversal to various religious traditions, apophatic theology claims that, while revealed truth could be final, its interpretations are not. The question I approach here is, how can ‘negative critique’, be applied to theories of pluralism?

Kenneth Rose (2013) suggests that it is pluralism itself, and not the various religions entering in dialogue one with the other, that must be apophatic. His proposition proceeds from the consideration that increasing religious diversity demands the rejection of any form of normative confessionalism or establishmentarianism. We must, first, become fully aware that religious formulations can never reach universal assent, and second, that they are not meant to last forever – other prophets could arrive, other religions could be founded, and current ones could be significantly regenerated in their fundamental characters by intermixing with others, as in the past with transitions from heresy to new religious movement to established orthodoxy. For Rose the future of religion is marked by practices of coexistence that would eventually lead to phenomena of departicularization; differently from Hick, the time span in which the transformation of religions through dialogue is likely to be realized is that of several thousand years, a time span so long that it is not any realistic to anticipate its outcome. This does not imply that cataphatic formulations are, per se, implausible and need to be rejected as false, but only that they are articulated in variable and impermanent forms, to the point that on the long term these *might* be substantially transformed or substituted by others. What should happen in the meanwhile?

Rose maintains that we need to respect the sovereignty of each religion, like particularists recommend, and that we must rather strengthen our epistemic openness to diversity by objecting reductionist

approaches to religious studies such as realism, constructivism and historicism. We should still be engaged in cataphatic analysis and cataphatic universalisms – it is in these, Rose argues, that new visions can emerge and scepticism can be fought. Nevertheless, being aware of the long term frailty of these recommends that affirmative formulations must be epistemically translated in an apophatic form. Cataphatic theologies must “remain in dialectical tension with the critical, apophatic challenges emerging from new insights in the nontotalized pursuit of science, philosophy, literature, theology, religious studies, and mysticism” (160). To be aware of the epistemic limitations of discursive reason entails conversations be as open as possible, within and beyond the boundaries of the religious, and for interlocutors to be self-critical about their own assumptions.

What is, then, the project of apophatic pluralism? In the words of Rose, it first of all consists in a body of “critical observations that deflate inclusivist illusions about the epistemic prowess, normativity, and ultimacy of cataphatic religious doctrine” (4). Rather than providing a religious truth by itself, in the form of a theological ideal to which the different cataphatic or apophatic theologies must conform, apophatic pluralism is a nonuniversalizing and nonsubstantive principle called to guide interreligious confrontation and any critical evaluation of truth claims. It is not a recommendation for religions to be liberal and for their members to be well disposed towards their creeds being falsified by competing and supposedly more reasonable doctrines. Apophatic pluralism states that there is no mechanism which can demonstrate the truthfulness or falsity of a religious doctrine to those who are not keen on being convinced. In the end, “the claim that apophatic pluralism is a necessary principle of the theology of religions is more like a grammatical rule ... To make a general claim about the nature of religious language is not the same as articulating a theological doctrine. To say that no doctrine is final, given the limits of human cognition and language, is not the same as claiming that all religions are true or that all religions point to the Absolute” (68). To say that no doctrine is final implies that its truth claims might not be normative for the whole humanity. Further, to say that no doctrine is final enhances our “openness to the new insights that are yet to emerge from the inscrutable depths of the mystery of being” (161).

How can the principle of apophatic pluralism be applied to the urban? How can it inspire modalities of interreligious cohabitation of the spaces of the city? How can we rethink our city through it?

3. Religious diversity, the theory of secularization, and the problem of plausibility

The debate around the comparability of competing truth claims is of crucial importance for the future of religion and for the shaping of the public realm. Its central query, as said, is focused on the likeliness for more than one doctrine to be *true*: what is discussed is ultimately the extent to which a truth claim might conserve its plausibility when confronted by a contrasting one. The problem of plausibility is particularly significant in a context of religious diversity: how could clashing claims coexist one with the other? This

is an epistemic *and* practical problem. If some truth claim is demonstrated to be false, should it be respected or even supported by the public? Or should the public rather actively operate for its dismissal?

Today's city is characterized by the compresence of a multiplicity of diverse belief systems, from those that are ascribable to established world religions to the nonreligious, to atheism and agnosticism; between these there are also new religions, syncretic ones, and various degrees of unstructured spirituality. Rather than limited to theology and philosophy of religions, the question of plausibility fully pertains to social sciences and political theory: how do different beliefs survive one to the other? How do they adapt their formulations to the religious other's presence? How can they peacefully coexist?

Social sciences and political theory have examined these questions through the lens of secularism, a socio-political doctrine characteristic of modernity that, in recent decades, has been widely contested for being ineffective in granting religious freedom and social cohesion. Such a doctrine, as it is discussed further in the text, is based on two principles: on the one hand, the principle of separation of politics and religion; on the other, that of the neutrality of the state, granted by the primacy of secular reason over religious truths. More than a doctrine, secularism is, for many commentators, an ideological supplement to the assumption that the significance of religion is destined to progressive decline, eroded by the rise of modern rationality and scientific thought, which is assumed as its rival, more authoritative and, in sum, final truth claim.

The following section frames secularism as a problem of plausibility. It does this in two ways. First, it discusses the cognate theory of secularization, conceived by many as the sociological dynamics provoked by the clashing of two groups of conflicting truth claims: that of the secular, modern reason and scientific thought; and that of the religious. And second, it presents various attempts of reformulating that theory to a change of paradigm, brought by the evidence that, rather than disappearing, religion persists in modernity, even though in transforming forms.

3.1 Secularization in the city: the crisis of plausibility

Secularization is one of the most disputed theory in the history of sociological thought. Promulgated by thinkers such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, in its classic formulation it either describes or predicts the ineluctability of a progressive disenchantment of the world in favour of modern scientific reason. When confronted by scientific knowledge and modern reason, faith would have inevitably receded; this would have happened, secularization's advocates claimed, at the level of the political, of social institutions, and of the individual. The future of religion, according to this view, would have been a minor one, for secularity would provide more solid groundings than religion for what concerns politics and the formation of the social, in addressing law and morality, but also in responding to ultimate questions about life and death, in processes of socialization as much as in the formation of subjectivity

and identity. Modernity, it is implied, can guarantee a direct access to a disenchanted reality, since its capacity to observe the real is freed from the myths of religion and is rather illuminated by reason.

The theory of secularization, nevertheless, has been the centre of various reformulations as new evidence emerges. Historical events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran or the rising of evangelism in South America, Africa and North-America have brought social sciences and philosophy to a Kuhnian revolution, whereas the emergence of an anomaly produces a new paradigm, that in turn conducts to new evidence – the permanence of religion in society and public life (Casanova 1994). First, various epicycles have tried to account anomalies by altering the original articulation of the thesis while saving its central premise. As social theorists have recently reconsidered its universality as much as the validity of its epicycles (Warner 2010; Gorski and Altinordu 2009; Edgell 2012), the academic community is now divided between a complete dismissal of the thesis itself and its reinterpretation under new postulations (Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Zuckerman 2012).

According to the sociologist José Casanova (1994), the notion of secularization has been outlined in three distinct and non-coincident ways. The first is that of a historical process of institutional differentiation and functional specialization initiated by the end of religious wars in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, commonly set forth by the Peace of Westphalia. The term was at first coined for describing the expropriation of religious properties promulgated by state power, and then, analogically, the declining temporal power of organized religions though the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* ('whose realm, his religion'). Secularization is here modelled as the mutual constitution of two distinct and independent social structures and domains, that of *the secular* and that of *the religious* – the state, the political, the social, and the market on the side of the secular, strictly separated from the soteriological and the spiritual, assumed as constitutive of the sphere of the religious. Crucially, such processes are concomitant to the rising of the political doctrine of nation-states and of secularism, or *laïcité*, according to which religion and politics must be as much separated as possible since one is dangerous for the free exercise of the other.

The second way of intending secularization constitutes its classic sociological theory, and indicates the progressive decline of religious beliefs, affiliations and practice in response to the emergence of a socio-technical apparatus and modern rationality. This understanding operates on both explanatory and normative levels. Grounded in the narrative of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, it is supported by two philosophical stances: on the one hand, the critique towards religious knowledge as utterly anti-scientific and obscurantist, a stance founded on an evolutionary understanding of religion as credulity and superstition paralleled by the attribution of a messianic role to science; on the other, the critique of religion as morally oppressive and pathological for the individual. In this sense secularization has been often symbolised through the myth of Prometheus, representing the individual and social emancipation

from the tyranny of ignorance and bigotry (Lara 2013). Frequently, this version of secularization is empirically explored through quantitative indicators such as religious affiliation, participation, vocations, and so forth.

The third variation is that of secularization as privatization of religion. According to its main proponent, the sociologist Thomas Luckmann (1974), religion has been marginalised into the private sphere to the point of becoming 'invisible'. Rather than to the decline of beliefs *per se*, this thesis suggests that secularization refers to the decline of organized religions. What modernity would produce is not the defeat of religious thinking, conceived here as a modality of perceiving and thinking the world qualitatively opposite to that of scientific reason, but instead a reduced capacity for religious institutions to influence the public, the definition of the common good, law making, education, public morals, and so forth. Religion can survive modernity, this thesis says, as long as it remains an individual factor and not a collective one. Decreasing levels of affiliation and attendance empirically observed by sociological research, in this view, would indicate the transformation of religion: whereas pre-modern social ordering was entirely fixed on religious teachings, worldviews and morals, modernity promotes individualized forms of religiosity that overstep formal practices and cannot be grasped by those indicators. As much as the notion of secularization emphasises the decline of the religious, it also has both analytical and normative significance, for it seems conceived "both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics" (Casanova 2013: 34). Put differently, for modernity religion *must* be kept as a private affair, for the public must be secular, freed from any religious explanation. As suggested by Talal Asad (2003), the privatization of religion does not signify that religious practices are confined to the private space but, more radically, that a distinction between public and private reason is being made, with religious truth claims being secluded within the latter. Crucially, the significance of this resides in the fact that private reason is for politics "the entitlement to difference, the immunity from the force of public reason" (8). In other words, in this third sense secularization is the process through which the modern city claims to transcend the particular, by giving to it a space of tolerance in the private realm, and to produce a common experience of the everyday that is common to all precisely because it is protected by the particular. For the public to be accessible to all, it is intended, the particular must be enclosed within the private: its cultivation as a private virtue must be defended as an inalienable right, but its presence in public must be regulated and limited.

These three connotations interrelate one another; more specifically, according to Casanova, the first establishes the prerequisite for the development of the others. The progressive separation of institutional spheres of competence at the level of the state and the public, variously sanctioned across different state constitutions, would have provided the rationale for a deep transformation of the epistemic realms of the social and the self. While radically different in their main postulations, the theses of secularization as

the decline of religion and that of secularization as the privatization of belief share their crucial assumption, that is, the progressive emancipation of society, politics and subjectivity from the influence of doctrines grounded in metaphysics and immaterial truths. Once the distinction between faith and reason is made, the access of religious truth claims to the public realm is regulated by their capacity of conforming to the epistemic criteria defined by secular modern rationality.

According to the philosopher Alessandro Ferrara (2009), three narratives describe the means and effects of secularization; these are not entirely coincident with the framing of secularization, but rather constitute the bedrock for its collated doctrine. The first one is political secularism, a narrative according to which liberty of conscience can be guaranteed only by a neat separation of state and religion. This would mean that freedom of religion, of adhering to one religion or another or rather being nonreligious at all, can happen as long as individuals “never invoke support from the state’s coercive power, never pretend to turn sin into crime and always allow their believers to change their mind and turn to another religion or no religion” (78). While individuals are free to adhere or not to a specific creed, the liberal state is called to be wholly neutral about the contents of their claims and at the same time to actively discourage their use within the political arena. The second narrative is that of social secularism. In this it is implied that the separation between different social niches, that of the religious and that of the secular, would be beneficial for social cohesion. According to social secularism, religious communities are required to be less and less influential in the definition of political identities, in collective ceremonies, rites of passage, practices of socialization, education, and so forth. The third conception of secularism, existential secularism, operates at the level of the individual’s experience of believing. It impacts how individuals might adhere or not to a specific religion by stating that to believe is only a matter of choice rather than, as in the past, a totalizing condition given by birth. At this level secularism implies that belief and non-belief are nothing but individual choices. They are mutually exclusive but equally valid; however, believing is conceived as the most onerous option, while non-belief is the default position. These visions of secularism are all defined by the reduction of the real in two opposite epistemic categories and registers, that they in turn actively contribute at reproducing: on the one side religion, endorsed by religious traditions and groups, unified and indistinct one from the other; and on the other the secular, which correspond to everything that is *not* religion. At the same time, secularism is depicted as a product of modernity, to be transferred outside of the Western world through colonialism (Bilgrami 2016; Asad 1993).

Various theories of secularization have conceived religion and the secular as two clashing truth claims – of which the religious is assumed as the weak one, a relic from the past in the process of being submerged by political, social, and existential secularisms. According to these views, religion would recede not because secular claims are simply more convincing, more *reasonable*, but because their presence in societal

life, in the everyday, would be more pervasive. The city, according to this view, would be the domain of the secular, and some come to the conclusion that there is a causal correlation between city life and a general decline of religion. If city life is inherently secular, then religion is there doomed to irrelevance.

One of the most representative supporters of this position has been for several decades Peter Berger, who framed secularization as the outcome of a crisis of plausibility originated by the compresence of competing truth claims within the space of the city. In his widely known *Sacred Canopy* (1967), city's diversity is seen as the agent of a "crisis of credibility" in religion, creating a condition in which "the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance" (127). The emergence of secularism is, for Berger, manifested through the functional and psychological de-monopolization of religion, where religious groups are forced to struggle with competing groups in exercising a symbolic and moral control over their members. The compresence of a multiplicity of religious teachings would eventually generate scepticism towards any religious truth claim and mean of salvation – in other words, if different religions affirm conflicting teachings around the same matters, one is brought to doubt the authority of whatsoever religious claims and end up favouring secular materialism. Not limited to situations of "intrareligious competition" where "religious groups, all with the same legal status, compete *with each other*", diversity obliges religions to compete "with various *non*-religious rivals in the business of defining the world, some of them highly organized (such as various ideological movements of revolution or nationalism), others much more diffused institutionally (such as the modern value systems of 'individualism' or sexual emancipation)" (137). Significantly, such a 'cartelization' over the defining of ultimate meanings hinders institutional religiosity but also individual acts of faith. As later argued by Gauchet (1999), religious diversity would ultimately lead to the *end of religion*.

"Religion manifests itself in its peculiarly modern form, that is, as a legitimating complex voluntarily adopted by an uncoerced clientele. As such it is located in the private sphere of everyday social life and is marked by the very peculiar traits of this sphere in modern society. One of the essential traits is that of 'individualization'. This means that privatized religion is a matter of the 'choice' or 'preference' of the individual or the nuclear family, *ipso facto* lacking in common, binding quality. Such private religiosity, however 'real' it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfil the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody. Instead, this religiosity is limited to specific enclaves of social life that may be effectively segregated from the secularized sectors of modern society" (Berger 1967: 133-134).

A related theory is brought by the Christian theologian Harvey Cox, in his celebrated writing on the *secular city* (1965). Eclectically influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jane Jacobs, Louis Wirth and Ferdinand Tönnies, Cox sees urbanization and secularization as consequent phenomena. According to his view, the desecration of religious cosmologies and rationalization of nature have transformed human settlements in dehumanising cities – from the tribe to the technopolis. Instead of a religious cohesion of values, practices, and sacred representations, what the modern city yields is “a structure of common life in which diversity and the disintegration of tradition are paramount” (Cox 1965: 4). Secularization and urbanization are here more than simply “twin tendencies”. Cox is even more emphatic than Berger in arguing that “contemporary man has become the cosmopolitan. The world has become his city and his city has reached out to include the world. The name for the process by which this has come about is *secularization*” (1). The physicality of city environment as well as its rhythms and lifestyles are the cause and the by-product of the pluralization of religious discourses disrupting religion as such:

“The age of the secular city, the epoch whose ethos is quickly spreading into every corner of the globe *is* an age of ‘no religion at all’. It no longer looks to religious rules and rituals for its morality or its meanings. For some religion provides a hobby, for others a mark of national or ethnic identification, for still others an esthetic delight. For fewer and fewer does it provide an inclusive and commanding system of personal and cosmic values and explanations” (3).

Nevertheless, Cox is distinctively more optimistic than Berger: in his view religion can survive the modern city insofar as it comes to terms with the fact that its interpretations of the real are now subordinated to secularism. While Berger considers the interactions between different religions and the secular in an exclusivist manner, as religion surrenders interreligious confrontation and the seductiveness of secularism, Cox is instead inclusivist (1988): religion might coexist with secularism as long as it reforms its doctrine on its lines. The only effective strategy for containing secularization is for theologies to be radically renewed by adopting the modes of secularism.

According to Cox, for example, religious beliefs and belongings, practices and morals are challenged by two distinctive components of city life. As in Simmel, the first is anonymity. Differently from what used to happen in traditional towns, the everyday man of the city encounters myriad people and stressful situations; for this, he needs to protect his privacy through emotional detachment. In the author’s view, this impacts practices of socialization and the built environment, whereas “apartment dwellers live a life in which relationships are founded on free selection and common interest, usually devoid of spatial proximity” (44-45). To better understand the mechanisms of the secular city, its success and breakdowns, paves the way of a Christian theology *for* the secular city: in this case, as “urbanization can be seen as a liberation from some of the cloying bondages of pre-urban society”, churches must, for example, abstain to “promote small-town intimacy among urban people and ... preach the necessity of I-Thou

relationships as the only ones that are really human” (47-48). The second threat posed by the secular city is mobility. For Cox “high mobility does play havoc with traditional religion”, as it “separates people from holy places” and “mixes them with neighbors whose gods have different names and who worship them in different ways” (54). For Cox, mobility is critical to religion because it violates the sacrality of the established religious order and because it exposes people to religious diversity – to other religions and to the practices of the secular. Anyway, one must concede that, as “high mobility is no assurance of salvation, but neither is it an obstacle to faith”, religious institutions must be able to contrast the “despatialization of the deity” by rather developing a new theological register sensitive to the nomadic experience of the sacred (56-58). Christian theologies, rather than simply countering religious diversity’s destructive agency through traditional theology, must acknowledge that the secular city is the unescapable epicentre of our times. For religion to survive the city, theology has to accept the challenge of secularism and cultivate a new metaphysical sensibility conveyed on the secular’s own terms.

3.2 *The crisis of the crisis of plausibility*

Many have criticised the correlation of city’s diversity and secularization. Despite the variety of interpretations, what the following counter-arguments share is that they all accept the thesis of secularization as institutional separation as an achieved historical process. Conversely, they reject either one or both of the other connotations of secularization, the decline of religion and privatization. Such critiques support their theses through contrasting indicators, such as the level of religious memberships or the maintained public significance of religious institutions.

One of the first scholars to do so was Daniel Bell (1977), who contended that the ‘aesthetic individualism’ of late modernity may instead reinvigorate religions as moralizing mediators, inasmuch as they are able of supporting forms of communitarian identification threatened by social anomie and responding to otherwise neglected existential questions. This argument is supported with quantitative data by Rodney Stark, who defines secularization as a *myth* (1999). His analysis stresses that religious diversity, rather than leading religion into a crisis of plausibility, may instead trigger and intensify participation (Finke and Stark 1998). His ‘supply-side’ theory aims at explaining both the vibrancy of congregational movements in the USA and, conversely, the disaffection towards organized religions in Europe, wherein residual religious monopolies under state regulation impede competitiveness and lower the ability of confessional groups to offer spiritual support to their members (Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 1998). These authors understand secularization as nothing but a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, a ‘performative ideology’. Although objected for its methodological proceedings (Voas et al. 2002; Chaves and Gorski 2001), the supply-side theory testifies a clear-cut turn across social sciences: the master-narrative of secularization is ultimately appraised as a fallacious paradigm that needs to be deeply modified if not reverted for coming to terms with evidence. José Casanova (1994; 2009) investigates how the combination of political

secularism and religious diversity may originate phenomena of ‘deprivatization’ of religion. For the Spanish sociologist, religious groups and institutions are called to reflexively accept religious diversity and the breaking of a monopolistic condition as an occasion for improving their theological framing and moral influence on society. The model proposed by Casanova is that of agonistic cosmopolitanism (2011): by turning from church-type to sect-type, acting as an interest group disjoined by state power with no pretensions of exclusivity, and reframing religious affiliation as a voluntary act of choice, religion can ultimately enhance its soteriological and political significance.

Others stress that diversity, rather than mining the plausibility of religion, has the effect of transforming its social form and the experience of believing. Some authors focus on phenomena of *a la carte* religion, in which heterogeneous elements extracted from traditional theological arrays can be creatively re-assembled notwithstanding the intermediation of religious institutions (Beck 2010; Voas 2008). According to Danielle Hervieu-Léger (1998: 217), “what is specifically modern is not that individuals make their own choice and combination (i.e. practice *bricolage*) of beliefs: it is that they assert their ‘right to *bricolage*’ altogether the right to ‘choose their own beliefs’”. Many have hypothesised a separation of belief and affiliation, arguing that rather than being individualized religious traditions are reinterpreted. Robert Bellah’s theory on civil religion (1985) investigates the hybridization of theological and nonreligious contents, framing individualism as a quasi-religious ethos. Grace Davie (1993) suggests that religion is increasingly marked by ‘believing without belonging’, whereas the persistence of beliefs is flanked by the decline of conventional indicators of religiosity such as church attendance or affiliations. Later, through the notion of ‘vicarious religion’, she demonstrates the resilience of religion in the public sphere in the form of public rituals and symbologies (2007). Storm (2009: 716) detects two concomitant trends: on one side, “religious belongings and identification with a church may continue without belief if the church is homogeneous and associated with other salient identities”; on the other, “religious belief may continue to be important to some people even when the church is no longer a community they can feel close to”. How can this happen?

An explanation is proposed by the work of Greeley on religious imaginaries (1989). Religion is here defined as “an imaginative ‘cultural system’, a set of symbols with an enduring socio-ethical significance through which humans organize and give meaning to the phenomena which impinge on their consciousness” (485). Rather than as a body of doctrines and methods, religious traditions are thought as “tenacious and durable narrative symbols that take possession of the imagination early in the socialization process and provide patterns of meaning and response that shape the rest of life” (501). Hervieu-Léger (1998) individuates various ways in which individuals may relate to religious imaginaries: first, for the definition of the socio-symbolic group boundaries (*communal dimension*); second, for their ethical contents (*ethical dimension*); third, for their artistic and historical value (*cultural dimension*); finally, for

the emotional charge enacted through rituals and religious practices (*emotional dimension*). Through these, religious teachings and knowledges are de-essentialized and re-presented as “collective religious memory ... constantly re-elaborated in such a manner that the past, which began with the historic foundation event, could still be understood as a meaningful whole” (216). These transformations are for her echoed by the sociological contraction of ‘religion’ and the widening of ‘the religious’ (2000). While forms of organized religion might lose members in many areas of the world, the religious is perpetually reinstated in new forms that creatively assemble old and new contents. This would explain the sociological compresence of significantly divergent phenomena of revival, of syncretism, of individualised religiosity, as well as the creation and rise of new cults. The field of religion, after secularization is sociologically contested, seems characterised by extreme fuzziness.

The most cohesive attempt of investigating the state of the religious *after* secularization is provided by the monumental work of Charles Taylor (2003; 2004; 2007). Taylor investigates the genealogy of secularity as a lived existential condition and of the political doctrine of secularism by looking at their philosophical, theological and socio-political gradients. These have transformed a society in which it was almost unthinkable to not believe in God, that of Middle Ages, to one in which non-belief represents instead the default option, the *Secular Age*. Such an historical proceeding culminates today in the rise of what he terms the ‘Age of Authenticity’, in which “each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (2007: 475). The shift towards expressive individualism is quintessential of an ‘immanent frame’ in which self-authorisation and free choice become crucial – choice about belief or non-belief, religious affiliation or not. Nevertheless, individuals live a ‘great disembedding’, trapped within a perpetual spiral of options about the life they conduct and they *should* conduct; altogether, as religion becomes disembedded itself from the social, they are left alone in their search for the right path to responding to their existential malaise (2003).

On a similar vein as Harvieu-Léger and Greeley, for Taylor individualization does not erase religious imaginaries, but indeed regenerates them through their integration within *new* social structures (2004). Even though incapable of constituting an ontological order for a broader collectivity, religion still grounds subjectivities and the public by dialoguing with the way we bodily interpret, anticipate and dwell the world:

“We shouldn’t perhaps speak simply of the loss of a neo-Durkheimian identity, or connection to religion through our allegiance to civilizational order, but rather of a kind of mutation. The religious reference in our national identity (and/or sense of civilizational order) doesn’t so much disappear, as change, retreat to a certain distance. It remains powerful

in memory; but also as a kind of reserve fund of spiritual force or consolation. It mutates from a 'hot' to a 'cold' form. The hot form demands a strong, participating identity, and/or an acute sense of Christianity as the bulwark of moral order. The colder form allows a certain ambivalence about the historical identity, as well as a certain degree of dissidence from the Church's official morality" (2007: 522).

Taylor rejects not only theories for the disappearing of the religious but even those of a de-secularization of the world. The secular age, according to Taylor, is ultimately characterised by a 'nova effect' of religious subjectivities that largely exceed the spectrum of organized religions. The renewal of religious forms within an immanent frame makes religious motivations in the political arena simply more *visible*: if "greater proximity of alternatives has led to a society in which more people change their position, that is, 'convert' in their lifetimes, and/or adopt a different position than their parents ... the faith arising in this contemporary predicament can be stronger, just because it has faced the alternative without distortion" (833-834).

For Joas, late modernity is characterized by contingency, by an increased number of choices "neither necessary nor impossible" (2004: 394). To choose for belief responds to an anthropological drive for self-transcendence, as the subject outstrips the boundaries of the self towards *something* beyond it – for example love, the community, or the divine. Religious diversity, rather than suggesting the implausibility of religious claims, stimulates participation: "mere confrontation with the fact that besides the Christian religion there are other religions or secular worldviews does not shake my Christian convictions" (396). On the contrary, the very fact that I feel responsible for my own choice of faith makes my resolution stronger. The so-called 'return of religion', rather than a numeric increase of belongings *tout court*, would for Joas describe the enhanced visibility of religious truth claims in the public realm. For Oliver Roy, religious groups are more visible precisely because they are at odds with a predominantly secular society (2006). According to the French sociologist, contemporary religiosity is extensively moulded through phenomena of de-culturation and of "disengagement with the territory", as "the internet, the circulation of missionaries, travel, migrations, use of English, the homogenization of rituals and practices, as well as secularization have allowed better accessibility to previously exotic or foreign religions" (2011: 11). Put differently, Taylor's nova effect exceeds modern patterns of religious spatiality characterized by proximity and affiliation due to the "accident of birth". Rather than fostering a crisis of plausibility, the capability of wandering around the various truth claims manifest across the cosmopolitan city, rejuvenates faith and cements new pathways for religious belongings.

What these theories suggest is that to strictly separate religion and the secular is increasingly problematic. This constitutes a radical shift from the canonical understanding of secularism, that evolves from a clear-cut opposition between two mutually irreconcilable spheres distinguished by specific domains and

registers. The model of the nova effect presents instead a fluid multiplicity of positions continuously intermingling one with the others within a wide spectrum of belief and unbelief, in which epistemological stances, morals and lifestyles are negotiated alongside the spatialities they enact and produce. As famously argued by Asad in his genealogical work (1993; 2003), the epistemic domains of religion and the secular are mutually co-constituted through the deployment of narratives of modernity that have been, and are, instrumental to the colonial project. If the concept of the secular cannot be thought without its opposite, religion, it can also be said that the religious itself is a notion invented by the secular for its adherence to be either tolerated or restricted.

One of the characteristics of the modern religious-secular dichotomy is that of presenting two homogeneous fields facing one the other. It is crucial to underline that the crisis of the theory of secularization is not simply the contestation of a scientific paradigm challenged by the emerging of too many anomalies. It is also the outcome of the decline of its *own* narrative, secularism, and, more broadly, of the intellectual contestation of the project of modernity. In sum, it can be said that the reality investigated by sociology of religion has thus been radically transformed by the emerging of two concurrent factors. First, an internal crisis of the social sciences has offered new epistemic tools that in turn have revealed a once invisible scenario, that is, the permanence of religion both in its institutional form and across new patterns of religiosity. Second, a more general crisis of the project of modernity, unable to maintain its own promises for emancipation and to provide ultimate meanings through disenchanted scientific rationality, stimulating a renewed demand for religiosity.

While the presented theses investigate the transformation of religion through the confrontation with secularism and its internal pluralization, a new body of research covers instead the other side of the spectrum of the nova effect, that of nonreligion (Lee 2012; 2014; Bullivant and Lee 2012; Day 2011; Guenther 2014; Quack 2014). What this approach study is how, rather than homogeneous, the area of nonreligion itself is constituted by a rich multiplicity of positions and narratives – from atheism and irreligiosity to spirituality and materialist forms of mysticism. Its claim is that “the population identifying with generic nonreligious categories is not equivalent to the nonreligious population *per se*, just as that identifying with religious categories is not equivalent to the religious population” (Lee 2014: 479). What is inferred is the need for qualitative investigating through bottom-up emic approaches the field of the nonreligious.

According to its proposers, by adopting nonreligion as its master-concept this approach is capable of accessing the lived experience of non-belief while penetrating religion through an indirect vision. This vision is in fact relational: nonreligion is assumed to be a narrative or a person, a concept or a doctrine, that is self-defined *primarily* by being *not* religious. This perspective aims to evade the logic of either/or that is often implicitly reproduced in studies on secularization, a logic that, for example, fails to come to

terms with the compresence and correlation of phenomena of religious revival and new forms of atheism. Rather than looking for overarching tendencies, what nonreligious studies illuminates is rather how “the borders of both fields, the religious and its surrounding nonreligious fields, are not static; they depend on the perspectives of those who assess them and on the strategic movements of all actors involved” (Quack 2014: 450). This approach includes, but is not limited to, the scope of atheism and agnosticism, which are conventionally assumed for exhausting the category of nonreligion. Nonreligion research investigates the broad spectrum containing secularity, the epistemic condition in which the secular is actualised, and secularism, the doctrine and ideological substratum that allocates religion and the secular as qualitatively distinct spheres. The task of this approach is to investigate the narratives of those who define themselves as nonreligious, and to understand to what extent understandings of religion and nonreligion impact and address one the other. Quack (2014: 463) offers a set of key questions that would animate the field: “What understanding of ‘religious’ beliefs, behaviours, and belonging are implied in such declarations and description? What consequences does alleged nonreligiosity have for the actors way of life, that is, for their own beliefs, behaviours and belongings? What different modes of nonreligiosity do people establish on the basis of various kinds of relationships to specific religious fields?”

Two points must be made. The first is that the concept of nonreligion invites researchers to self-critically reflect about their own positionality in relation to the religion-nonreligion articulation. In this sense it questions how scientific enterprise enshrine religious-nonreligious tensions in order to deal with its own requirements for factual objectivity and value neutrality. The second is that, while their contents are to variable extents qualitatively different, in the secular age religious and nonreligious individuals often think about the real through similarly structured cognitive systems and shared narratives. The whole field, said differently, is always constructed in relation to the discursive formations and lived performances constituting the religious and the nonreligious – for each pole is defined in dependence from what perceived and reproduced as its direct opposite.

4. The diversity of postsecularism

The literature review has underlined some significant points. First, modernist previsions for the linear decline of religion formulated by the classic theory of secularization have been widely contested and reassessed through a number of counter-theories. Religion is still here, and many claim that its future permanence is not in doubt. Not only privatized forms of unstructured faith and individualized spirituality but also traditional religion may gain public relevance in either institutional forms or within social imaginaries (Bottici 2009). Second, the condition of religious diversity manifest in the city, with various religious and nonreligious truth claims contending for the same spaces, does not automatically lead to a crisis of plausibility of religion: contingency may instead have “turned out to involve a rebirth

of religion, but religion of a qualitatively new kind” (Kyrlezhev 2009: 22). What theoretical shifts within social sciences have suggested, an interpretation boldly confirmed by recent political events, is that instead of being privatized in favour of secular public reason religious claims can become more visible than in the past (Hjelm 2015). Third, recent theoretical shifts within sociology and anthropology indicate that religious diversity needs to be assessed as the coming together of a wide multiplicity of interpretations on truth and on the real, a nova effect that comprises fundamentalisms, orthodoxies, neotraditionalisms, mild forms of religiosity, nominal affiliations, phenomena of believing without belonging and of belonging without believing, but also a variety of forms of nonreligiosity, from unstructured spirituality to irreligiosity and new atheism.

Linda Woodhead (2016) distinguishes between three complementary arrangements of religious diversity¹. The first sees religious diversity as the coexistence of the religious and the secular, two fronts that represent two opposite modalities of conceiving truth, the social, and the public. The second conceives religious diversity as the cohabitation of different religions within the same space. This understanding of religion, crucially, transcends the domain of organized religion for including the various forms of religiosity, within and beyond traditions and institutions, described in the previous section. The third is that of religious de-differentiation, a sphere that comprises all the various shades of nonreligion. This mode denotes that, as theories of secularization ceases to be sociologically convincing and to fulfil its promises through the salvific demise of religion, old classifications of religion outstrip the religion-secular divide: “religion has leaked into areas of life from which it was temporarily exiled by modern projects; the religious-secular distinction becomes blurred or meaningless; the category of religion becomes toxic; the reality of religion as a separate domain of socio-political life wanes; religious professionals lose status and authority; people become their own priest” (46). This does not mean that this third mode has substituted the first two for making differences between creeds irrelevant, but rather that specific understandings of religion and nonreligion are openly negotiated within specific space-times. The condition of religious diversity we live is given by the intersection of the three; to acknowledge that religion is today to be found in the concomitance of these three modes constitutes a challenge for both social analysis and political theory.

How can diversity of truth claims be epistemically and politically accommodated if every interpretation of the real is nothing but a claim among the others? How can the public, law-making processes and the production of urban space, achieve social cohesion while being respectful of difference? For Taylor

¹ Woodhead uses the expression ‘religious pluralism’ rather than ‘religious diversity’. Here I change the lemma in ‘diversity’ for reasons of clarity, by distinguishing between ‘religious diversity’, a condition characterised by the compresence of more than one religious systems, and ‘pluralism’, a specific approach to the theological or socio-political accommodation of religious diversity that positively postulates their coexistence.

(2010) the doctrine that has the precise scope of pursuing this task would have been that of liberal secularism. He charges to a successful form of secularism three complementary requirements: that of liberty, the capacity of fully guaranteeing freedom of conscience; equality, the fact that no groups can be epistemically and politically advantaged or disadvantaged; and fraternity, that all subjectivities should be allowed to freely contribute to the shaping the common good. Since its European variant, especially in the French version of *laïcité*, has predominantly circumscribed the treatment of religious diversity through the policy of mere separation of state and church and the distinction between public and private reason, its most impellent mandate has been largely evaded. In fact, for Taylor the most significant political task of secularism is encapsulated in the attainment of the principle of neutrality, that is, the commitment “to avoid favouring or disfavouring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious. We can’t favour Christianity over Islam, but also we can’t favour religion over against non-belief in religion, or vice versa” (25). Intended as such, liberal secularism would have been called to shape a form of nonfoundational pluralism at the state level. As exemplified by models of interreligious dialogue, the question is whether the principle of neutrality can be ever really achieved, how it can be achieved, and at what costs.

Many contend that secularism fails to harmoniously accommodate religious diversity precisely because, just like the classic theory of secularization to which it is strictly intertwined, it is nothing but another ideological thrust of modernity – which, as a project, is assumes as coextensive to secularity. It fails, it is held, precisely because it does not institute an authentically objective point of view free from partisan tendencies but is itself a truth claim, a specific estimation on the real and the social advancing its own political view about which competing claims can be endorsed and favoured but which should be merely tolerated or objected. By not acknowledging that it cannot evade the arena of religious diversity for it constitutes a religious de-differentiated truth claims, liberal secularism discards any self-awareness about the epistemic stances from which it evaluates other claims. In other words, secularism cannot guarantee neutrality because it is not neutral itself; in consequence of this, it inevitably favours certain claims while disfavouring others.

As argued by Saba Mahmood (2016), there are two main problems with political secularism. The first is that, rather than abstaining from expressing its preferences on religious matters, it actively regulates doctrines and practices. The second is that, by naturalizing the epistemic partiality of its stand on the real, it is particularly hostile towards religious minorities. The principle of neutrality acts both as a legal mandate and as an aspiration: as a legal mandate, “it depends upon the agency of the sovereign state, which does not simply relegate religion to the private sphere but reorganized it through its legal and political mechanism. As an aspiration, religious equality is embedded in the historically grounded sensibilities of the different communities that constitute the social” (211). The problem is that secularism

is by nature subject to mirroring the inclinations and sensibilities of national majority. Like a political form of inclusivism, it comprehends the religious other within the precise terms of the hegemonic traditions it evolves from. This tradition is that of a religious majority and, at the same time, that of secularism itself. Often, secularism essentializes religion and flatten diverse religious positions to their lowest common denominator. Accordingly, it regulates religious diversity by assuming religion and the secular as internally homogeneous fields to be accounted through the same strategies, while conceding some special rights to some selected religious minorities. Mahmood concludes that secularism exacerbates the political tensions it is called to manage rather than being a solution to their strife, polarizing religious differences and intensifying inequalities.

The paradox of political secularism is recapped by Asad as such:

“Liberal democracy here expresses the two secular myths that are, notoriously, at odds with each other: the Enlightenment myth of politics as a discourse of public reason whose bond with *knowledge* enables the elite to direct the education of mankind, and the revolutionary myth of universal suffrage, a politics of large numbers in which the representation of ‘collective will’ is sought by quantifying the *opinion* and *fantasy* of individual citizen-electors. The secular theory of state toleration is based on these contradictory foundations: on the one hand elite liberal clarity seeks to contain religious passion, on the other hand democratic numbers allow majorities to dominate minorities even if both are religiously formed” (2003: 61).

Two examples can effectively illustrate this point. The first is the notorious 2004 ban over headscarves in France. Whilst in principle this was sanctioning every religious symbol icon worn in public schools, through the supposedly neutral criteria of ostensibility it was actually limiting its repressive action on certain religious symbols while exempting others from the ban, such as the crucifix (Hunter-Henin 2012). The second example is that of the unfinished official recognition of Islam in Italy (Cagliavina 2013). The Italian state recognises a religious group when it signs a formal agreement with the government, to be later ratified by the Parliament. Only through this legal procedure can a religious group become entitled to certain rights such as those of receiving donations from tax payers, tax exemptions, being represented in schools, hospitals, prisons, and so forth. Since Islam does not have a clergy let alone any central representative authority for negotiating and subscribing such a treaty on the national level, its official recognition is still to be accomplished. The point here is that, plural by nature, Islam cannot have a unique leadership without deeply modifying its identity, which is precisely the charge that the Italian state demands through this norm. Rather than neutral, in both cases, the accommodation of religious diversity is structured at its roots through the generalization of a specific entanglement of religion, that of the majority; in reason of this, its application is highly discriminatory.

As explained by Vattimo (2002), secularism “succeeded only because it was realized on the solid, if unacknowledged, basis of a common religious heritage. The lay space where religion has ceased to be a factor of conflict was carved out in Western modernity within a broader, though less acknowledged, religious space of Christian, Judeo-Christian, or biblical origin” (95). Western secularism achieved its goals insofar as the competitors were at large reduced to two: Christianity and a post-Christian secularity. Within the current scenario of increasing religious diversity the ambiguous relationships between political secularism and a majority religion is proven not only to be ineffective but rather to constitute a primary factor in promoting or exacerbating epistemic asymmetries, socio-political inequalities, and conflicts. In other words, the validity of the principle of state neutrality towards competing truth claims is now extensively objected for creating asymmetries between different knowledges and subjectivities – between those who have a strong political representation and those who are not represented at all. Notwithstanding its promises for pluralism, the application of political secularism in the liberal state fluctuates between paternalistic forms of inclusivism and of less benign exclusivism. Many now call for a ‘change in paradigm’ and the development of an epistemic and legal pluralism; it is however largely acknowledged that this change cannot be fully achieved if not through a profound rethinking of the philosophical groundwork of secularism itself (Rosati 2010; Stoeckl 2010; Mavelli and Petito 2013).

The notion of postsecular has been introduced in the debate with this precise goal. While for some it would not constitute the obliteration of secularism but its extension under more pluralistic principles, for others it is rather the conclusive point of its philosophical rebuttal. Stretched out in the space between religious studies, social analysis and policy-making, the field of the postsecular is extremely heterogeneous, and the concept itself still theoretically opaque – ranging from Habermas’ proceduralism (1998) to Caputo’s ethics of love (2001), from Milbank’s *Radical Orthodoxy* (Milbank et al. 1999) to Braidotti’s radical immanence (Braidotti et al. 2014) and Connolly’s radical becoming (1999). What do these approaches share? First, by rejecting the divide between private faith and public reason, they endorse a counter-hegemonic challenge towards the totalizing narrative of Western modernity – a narrative according to which religion is a residual modality of thinking that will be sooner or later eradicated by positive thought and that since then needs to be tolerated but variously disapproved or discouraged. Second, they advance new ways for granting the right to difference and for rethinking the public realm through the integration of an undefined multiplicity of knowledges.

In sum, postsecular scholars call for a revived interchange between metaphysics and the political, while aiming at favouring an intellectual climate in which the public is demanded to admit the contribution brought by religious claims as relevant to the structuring of its epistemologies, ethics and social order. They oppose political secularism, the marginalisation of religious knowledge and communities in the private realm in favour of a public reason grounded on disenchantment and materialism. At the same

time, they maintain that the epistemic foundations of social secularism are ideological and falsely emancipatory, while repositioning the religious at the midpoint of human experience as such. The goal of postsecular critique is then the rediscovery of the significance of metaphysics within the indistinct sphere of philosophy tout court, in a movement that realigns the religious as essential to the formation of knowledge, of the self, of the political, and of the social. By discarding both religious fundamentalism and anti-religious extremism, the postsecular reflects on the conditions under which religious as well as nonreligious individuals and groups can fruitfully collaborate to the shaping of the public realm. It is important to underline that postsecular objections to secularism do not advocate for a return to pre-modern societies: rather than arguing for an impossible denial of religious diversity and the return to religious homogeneity, the postsecular aims at refashioning neutrality to the needs of a multifaceted secular age; as underlined by McLennan (2010: 19), it thus acts as an “*intra*-secular rather than *anti*-secular” framework. Dalferth (2010: 336) suggests that postsecularity would be in fact the condition in which neither the state nor the society define themselves in terms of religiosity, but where they rather become indifferent to matters of religion: as such, the postsecular “rejects a religious self-definition, but still accepts *the negation or rejection of a religious determination as an intrinsic feature of its own self-understanding*”. The specific aim of postsecular theories is then to positively accommodate religious diversity by avoiding the asymmetries brought by secularism, while trying to produce a cohesive political realm in which difference can be respected and flourish.

Bengston (2016) highlights two intertwined axes through which postsecular theses are explicitly or implicitly articulated. One explores the relations between transcendence and immanence and being and becoming as the tensions through which one is capable of accessing the real. Here Bengston classifies three different approaches within postsecular scholars. The first, defined as ‘Protestant postsecularism’, conceives immanence and transcendence as two antithetical spheres, wherein the former is the space of reason and the latter is the domain of belief. Drawn from William of Ockham and Kant, this is the position subscribed to, for example, by Habermas; this approach directly replicates that of modern secularism. The second, defined ‘French Catholic postsecularism’, sees a non-dualist integral continuity between the supernatural and the natural. Inspired by French theologians such as Blondel and Lucal, this approach is today represented by John Milbank. The third, named ‘Deleuzian postsecularism’, is instead a purely monist account in which the transcendent is always already enclosed within immanence in the unfolding of the material through a plurality of bodies in becoming. Influenced by Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza, it animates the vitalist perspective proposed by philosophers such as William Connolly (1999) and Rosi Braidotti (2008). These approaches are directly reflected on the second axis, which explores instead the question of truth, a question strictly intertwined to matters of authority and policy-making. This is observed in three aspects: the first concerns the correlation between ontology and ethics, that is, how subjective faith impacts the formation of public values; the second deals with the terms in which

the dialogue can be enacted, the epistemic basis upon which the confrontation between competing truth claims should be taken; the third is concerned with the possibility for dialogue to really happen and the desired outcome of the dialogue, which Bengtson refers to as ethics of difference.

According to postsecular scholars, the articulation of these two axes informs the core of *every* truth claim within the nova effect, of those linked to religious traditions and systematic theologies as well as of those assumed as conventionally secular. By looking at how these axes are taken, the distinctions between faith and reason and between religion and the secular may appear blurred, or, on the contrary, be reinforced. Marginalised as irrelevant for the formation of the public sphere by secularism, they are now widely mobilised by postsecular scholars as the pivotal spot in which the shaping of public morality and policies is going to be defined. Their articulation is in fact not innocent: it is precisely through it that specific truth claims conceive and embed specific epistemic and ethical projects, even though sometimes covertly, and outline how to think, structure and build the social. By looking at these axes, it is also possible to understand the extent to which postsecular authors diverge for what concern their conceptualizations of the real and of the social as well as their strategies for accommodating difference. Despite having similar aims, they differently place religion in the public realm and define its role in public policies. While they all agree on the need for religion to be included in the public debate, they also strongly disagree on *how* this task should be achieved: significantly, they differently inform and set specific conceptions of how to account religious diversity.

In what follows I briefly present two versions of the postsecular, that of Jürgen Habermas and of John Milbank. My specific focus is how these authors define the scope of postsecularism in regard to the question of truth and interreligious dialogue. My proposition, that of apophatic pluralism, is advanced in the form of a comment to each approach.

4.1 Habermas' procedural postsecularism

Whilst not the first scholar adopting the term, Habermas is conventionally considered as the main proponent of postsecular theories (2006; 2008; 2010; Habermas and Ratzinger 2007). Drawn as a redevelopment of post-metaphysical thought and communicative action, his entailment is that of a post-Rawlsian liberal framework for deliberative practices and decision-making processes to be more inclusive to religious groups.

Habermas stresses that his “proceduralist conception of Kantian inspiration insists on an autonomous grounding of constitutional principles that claims to be rationally acceptable to all citizens” (2008: 104). For the legitimacy of law-making is guaranteed by the consistency of deliberative procedures, the first requirement is the participation of *all*: liberal democracy is achieved only under the condition that all interested parties are allowed to freely offer their contribution, so that “the addressees of the laws can

also understand themselves to be the authors of these laws” (121). The liberal state needs to be able to receive religiously motivated assertions not only because their contents are meaningful to their adherents, but also because they can be rich and emancipatory for the society as a whole. Indeed, Habermas views religion as a potentially liberating pre-political source for public morality and public life. Interreligious dialogue between religious and nonreligious actors can be beneficial to both parties, since it can solicit a major awareness about each others’ limits and competence.

Nevertheless, the cohabitation of competing worldviews can be problematic, as teachings are often incompatible one with another. Habermas urges that pluralism can be achieved insofar as different epistemic constituencies dialogue through a double reflexivity: that of religious groups, that must accept diversity of beliefs and values; and that of nonreligious groups and of the state, refraining from setting one epistemic stance in a hegemonic position. Here comes the second requirement for postsecular procedures, mutual learning. For Habermas “fair arrangements can be found only if the parties involved also learn to adopt the perspectives of the others” (2011: 120-21). Ultimately all the different interlocutors, religious and nonreligious, are demanded to renounce their “claim to a monopoly on interpretation and to shape life as a whole”, since “the conception of tolerance of pluralistic liberal societies not only requires believers to recognize that they must *reasonably* reckon with the persistence of disagreement in their dealings with non-believers and members of other faiths. The same recognition is also required of unbelievers in their dealings with believers” (111-112). A just encounter between different worldviews can happen only if “we construe social and cultural secularization as a twofold learning process that compels the traditions of the Enlightenment and religious teachings to reflect on each other’s limits” (2008: 102).

The third requirement is the possibility for competing actors to reach an overlapping consensus. This is mediated by common language, common purposes, and a common device upon which claims can be evaluated. Differently from other postsecular scholars, Habermas does not object to the eventual practicability of state neutrality, but rather tries to refashion the mechanisms through which it responds to the epistemic specificity of religious claims. Although admitting the cogency of religious claims, Habermas’ pluralism is methodologically atheist. For public norms to be valid for all they must be freed from any reference to religious claims of validity; not differently from classic secularism, public reason must still strictly follow Grotius’ principle of ‘*etsi deus non daretur*’ – to live, dialogue and legislate as if God was not given. Diffident towards metaphysics, Habermas strictly separates reason and faith. Dialogue ultimately aims at intersubjective consensus, and this can be provided only by rational agreement around the better argument: for this argument needs to be valid for all, it must be formulated in a secular language. Consequentially “the specifically religious reasons should in any case be excluded, simply *because* they cannot be translated into generally accessible, rational arguments” (Braeckman 2009: 283).

Habermas here appeals to the stratagem of translation. For translation to be possible, it is implied that a claim can be reduced to an underlying argument that makes sense to a nonreligious person; it is precisely this argument, whose validity exceeds the parochial form in which it is conveyed, that for Habermas must be included in deliberative practices. The act of translation can be made by the religious actors themselves, or better, by their more eloquent representatives. Diversely, monolingual actors must be able to be supported by secular citizens willing to engage in interreligious dialogue.

But can this ever happen? A number of critiques tackles Habermas' version of the postsecular. First, some envisages a structural asymmetry between nonreligious and religious citizens, whereas the latter are authoritatively demanded to use the language of the former (Cooke 2006; Baumeister 2011). Others emphasise that translation can be very problematic where religious diversity flanks with the strong prevalence of a specific once monopolistic confessional group, wherein "controversial religious claims are less likely to be counterbalanced by other different religious cultures" (Ferrara 2010: 88; Urbinati 2011). Pluralism can be hindered by the primacy of certain religious traditions over imaginaries – over traditional and yet secularized *modus vivendi* (Yadgar 2011; Jansen 2011). How can translation be neutral if the secular is also religiously grounded? The language of the secular is not neutral because it is not by any extent equidistant to different constituencies: it is familiar to some, while alien to others.

One reason is that Habermas obliterates the internal differences of both the religious and the secular. For this, he overlooks how differently seized argumentations have different authority towards the public and citizenship – that some may appear as reasonable to some while absolutely unreasonable to others, that some might be discarded by majority primarily because the minority group bringing it to the public cannot express it in the majority's terms. What Habermas seems to neglect is that any argument mirrors power relations whose persuasivity transcends their utter validity. By setting public reason above competing truth claims, Habermas' pluralism slides into another form of liberal inclusivism reproducing the epistemic predominance of majority norms (Birnbaum 2015).

The second reason is that, rather than a fusion of interests between religious and nonreligious epistemics, Habermas seems merely to promote "non-religious communication conducted by religious actors" (Kohrsen 2012: 281). This not only because contents of decision-making are pragmatically *secular-thiswordly*, but because translation erodes the core of what religious claims really mean (Bergdahl 2009). Religious discourses are untranslatable: since "religious ways of life cannot be translated into non-religious ways of life without, at least, some kind of loss or transformation ... Habermas's cognitive model of understanding is problematic because it seems to assert that differences can be overcome without the interference of cultural and linguistic incommensurabilities" (33-34). Such a condition, as for Derrida, reveal our irreducible monolingualism (2008).

Habermas conceives reason as embodied, immanent, historical and socially constructed. For William Franke (2008), his rejection of metaphysics and revelation renders his pluralist framework incapable of fully accounting the religious'. Only by admitting the possibility of granting epistemic validity to revealed reason, postsecularism can really welcome radical diversity; "only in being open to others, and thereby to being modify and enriched, can this unlimited disclosure remain open toward the totality that it blindly envisages. In this opened toward a total, unrestricted disclosure of all, reason and revelation ultimately agree and practically come to coincide" (391). In other words, what Habermas' postsecularism access to through discursive reason is still discriminatory towards religious groups for the precise reason that it dismisses their own specific voice, that of the unsayable.

4.2 *John Milbank: the counter-narrative of the ecclesia*

The Anglican theologian with a solid expertise in pre-modern Christian thought and post-structuralism, John Milbank has emerged since the first publication in 1990 of his *Theology & Social Theory* (2006) as the most prominent proponent of the movement called Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank et al. 1999). His take on the postsecular is of a radically different kind to that of Habermas. The difference between the two, so profound that makes their systems hardly reconcilable (Milbank 2013), is given by the fact that Milbank comprehends the secular, rather than the natural dispensation of sense remaining after theologies are suspended, as the sectarian expression of a specific theological account. For Milbank, the secular is not a blank space upon which religious accounts emerge, and not even an autonomous domain; on the contrary, it is a truth claim, and a fallacious one, directly subordinated to the religious. Its characteristics are in fact those of being materialistic, immanentistic, mechanistic, and scientist – characteristics that are entailed in blatant opposition to the conventionally religious ones. Its specificity is given by its refusal of the supernatural and of revelation, of transcendence and metaphysics, circumscribing the object of ontological enquiry, the real, to the sensible and the immanent, to what it says to be subject to rational proof and empirical knowledge for being immediately manifest to our senses. The secular is nevertheless nothing but a socially and historically contingent heresy, the invention of a space-time that needs to be deconstructed and fought in reason of its inherent violence. It a religion in disguise, embracing "sacred violence ... a post-Christian paganism, something in the last analysis only to be defined, negatively, as a refusal of Christianity and the invention of an 'Anti-Christianity'" (280). Milbank maintains its metaphysics are ultimately of nihilist and thus malign nature, for its negation of transcendence eradicate any resemblance of hope and authority. By proclaiming the myth of humanism and of the autonomy of the individual, its anthropology instituted leaves the man alone in despair.

For Milbank, the genealogy of the secular, rather than with the philosophers of the Enlightenment, started within the history of Christian theology; in particular, Milbank tracks its birth back to Duns Scotus' nominalism and Grotius' natural law, fixed on the principle of *etsi Deus non daretur*, 'as if God is

not given'. Differently from philosophers such as Vattimo (1999) or Nancy (2008), according to whom secularization constitutes the purification and final accomplishment of Christianity, for Milbank it rather corresponds to its deterioration, to a tragic loss. Rather than sanctioning its irreversibility, as in Harvey Cox's secular city, this process has to be firmly rejected and overturned. It is in fact in reason of it that the integral ontology of Christianity, firm in the indissolubility of cosmology, anthropology and morality, has been substituted by a plethora of differentiated competing spheres blandly coordinated by the fragile notion of reason alone. In Milbank's words, with secularism unity is subverted in chaos: "no longer is the world participatorily enfolded within the divine expressive *Logos*, but instead a bare divine unity starkly confronts the other distinct unities which he has ordained" (2006: 15). Once the relationship between God and humankind is taken out from the principles of participation and analogy, once ontological difference is discarded and God is reduced to a being within beings, then the social and the political sink in anomy and moral relativism. The pathway for thinkers such as the Hobbes of *The Leviathan* or the Spinoza of the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus*, and then for a political theology of despotic impersonal power and privatised virtues, is finally paved.

Milbank's critique of secularism aims to "level the playing field so that the secular and the religious are on the same epistemological ground given that they both rest on non-provable assumptions" (Bengston 2016: 54). This can be achieved only by elevating theology as the only epistemic register and discourse we can ever make about the real. Every discourse on the real is for Milbank theologically produced: all sciences are nothing by theology, social science is theology, philosophy is nothing but theology, for the precise reason that they all proceed from a specific take on the relations between transcendence and immanence and of being and becoming. Whenever they allow the secular to permeate their epistemic bases, they are, nonetheless, bad theology, for they respond to the mystery of the unseen by simplistically negating its unreserved validity. Humanist sciences and positivism, Milbank argues, are then nothing but "the self-knowledge of the self-construction of the secular as power" (2006: 10). Through the invention of the secular and its own mundane space-times, they also invent the religious as a separate sphere with distinct functions, registers, and space-times: eventually, "although religion is recognized and protected, it is also 'policed', or kept rigorously behind the bounds of the possibility of empirical understanding" (106). Throughout cataloguing and explanatory models such as functionalism or ideology, social sciences operate as subsidiary to modern ontological violence, inasmuch as their strategy of "policing of the sublime' exactly coincides with the actual operations of secular society which excludes religion from its modes of discipline and control, while protecting it as a 'private' value, and sometimes invoking it at the public level to overcome the antinomy of a purely instrumental and goalless rationality" (*ibidem*). Once it is proved that the secular is nothing but a degraded theology, it can be opposed by a counter-theology, which is essentially the reinstatement of an integral theology that precedes and opposes to functional separation and the disjunction of faith and reason. Milbank's postsecularism is thus a theological project

of bestowing epistemic hegemony to theology. While social sciences need theology for the definition of their own field and goals, that of an invented social upon which religious is instrumentally posed and the maintaining of the political as mere power, revealed theology is completely autonomous in virtue of its capacity of providing ultimate meanings and transcendental unity to difference. Given the impossibility of neutrality, the postsecular needs to enact a counter-narrative, but of a more persuasive kind of the secular. To counter its nihilism, “one cannot resuscitate liberal humanism, but one can try to put forward an alternative *mythos*, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an ‘ontology of peace’, which conceived differences as analogically related, rather equivocally at variance” (279).

This *mythos* is that of Christianity. Milbank’s postsecular aims “to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality” (383). Arguing for the primacy of Christian doctrine, Milbank builds his approach to postsecularism as an ecclesiology. His political theory evolves precisely from the premises that the unfulfilled promises of modern secularism for a peaceful cohabitation of difference can be maintained only through restructuring the social as organic to the church. For the church, which is here specifically the Catholic Church, is for Milbank the only space in which diversity can be successfully negotiated and a correct form of pluralism achieved. This point is elucidated through the concept of the gift: for societies to be bound together a social contract is not sufficient, and so are voluntarism or Franciscan piety, which is in the end another product of secularism; we rather must argue in favour of an authentic ethos of generosity through which people animated by different creeds exchange their own deepest belonging, their sacral identity, with other people. Ecclesia is then not a monadic realm circumscribed to a specific community existing within a specific space-time but instead a “sort of universal polity ... invented by Christianity” (2009: 256). The Church is essentially, Milbank contends, the reconciliation of difference: it “*cannot* be found amongst the merely like-minded, who associate in order to share a particular taste, hobby, or perversion. It can *only* be found where many different people possessing many different gifts collaborate in order to produce a divine-human community in one specific location” (271). Why then the primacy of Christianity, and not just of an ecumenical religion deprived of specific doctrinal characters?

First, Milbank argues that we need a single space to be fixed, for “universal Church is found paradoxically in one space, within one circumscribed boundary and in one sacred, consecrated building ... only in one specific place can one erect a building which ... images at once the cosmos, the human person, and the transition of human history from old to new covenant through the eschaton ... and only in such a building can human beings come together simply as human being, rather than as political, economic, or religious beings” (272). But why should this place be inherently Christian? Milbank clarifies this requirement through a doctrinal argument, that of Trinity: “human beings *cannot* come together as such

in the same way even in a mosque or a synagogue. This is because in a church we come together simply in order to join ourselves to perfected humanity which is transformed through the Incarnation as more than humanity and not in the name of any law, custom, or specific tradition. Nor do other religions conceive of a spiritual society like that of the Church which is in principle self-sufficient and all-embracing” (*ibidem*). How can postsecularism as ecclesiology respond to religious diversity? How can difference be accommodated if the middle ground is a theological claim assumed as the one religion?

As I have argued, Milbank directly opposes to Habermas’ understanding of the postsecular for this would be mainly a “reiteration of the now threatened status quo”, that of secularity (2013: 330). Procedural liberalism is, for him, a theological take hostile to religious knowledge and incapable of addressing Christian ethos of generosity beyond voluntarism. It is incapable, in other words, of respecting human liberty for it is trapped in a naturalist framework lacking any metaphysical foundations. Accordingly, he rejects Hick’s pluralism, critically addressed in the essay *The End of Dialogue* (1990). Interreligious dialogue, for Milbank, is an illusion trapped in the false notion of religion as a genus, a notion in reason of which religious claims are dissociated from their own situatedness and from the voices through which these express “our biographical or transbiographical processes of coming-to-know” (177). Milbank claims instead that religions are integral, non-reflected, autonomous lived realities that “entail incommensurable social projects, whose differences are only mitigated once these projects – and hence the whole original reality of the religions themselves – are heavily subordinated to the universal sway of the liberal state and the capitalist market” (179). Hick’s pluralism, by promoting their conflation and hybridization, would be then another name we give to the deterritorializing power of secular modernity, in which difference is forfeited in the name of modernity’s collated myth of liberal governability. Milbank’s argument is then that interreligious dialogue is nothing but secular imperialism, wherein the respect for the religious other is sacrificed on the altar of a supposedly underlying universal truth upon which cultural specificities have been juxtaposed.

He advances a two-faced proposition: first, that “it will be better to replace ‘dialogue’ with ‘mutual suspicion’”; second, that Christian theology “should simply pursue further the ecclesial project of securing harmony through difference and a continuous historical conversation not bound by the Socratic constraints of dialogue around a neutral common topic. In the course of this conversation, we should indeed expect to constantly receive Christ again, from the unique spiritual responses of other cultures. But I do not pretend that this proposal means anything other than continuing the work of conversion” (190). Said differently, interreligious dialogue is a form of exclusivism concealing its theological arrogance by perpetually evoking the chimera of overlapping consensus and common ground; for this, it is better to conceive interfaith encounters as a form of agonistic confrontation that has its ultimate horizon in the capitulation of one of the two interlocutors by *conversion*. Rather than in the myth of neutrality, pursued

through secular universalism, methodological atheism or common ground seeking interreligious dialogue, the political must find its unique ruling centre in Christianity. This because Christianity is the sole theology, Milbank maintains, able to provide secure basis to other religious beliefs and practices – to the point that only a “Christian outlook, and nor a secular one, can accord to Islam respect as Islam” (2010: 139). To refer to the triple categorization of exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism, Milbank’s take for a “vestigially Christian polity” (Pabst 2013) represent a form of muscular exclusivism, according to which religious diversity cannot *but* be subsumed by a predominant One religion, Christianity (Bengston 2016). If other religions want to be included within Christendom as autonomous creeds, they need to become part of the Church, to become a specificity within all-encompassing Christian cosmopolis:

“What other faiths require for their proper recognition in Europe is the public recovery of the indigenous European religious tradition – *Christianity*. Only Christianity can integrate other religions into a shared European project by acknowledging what secular ideologies cannot: a transcendent objective truth that altogether exceeds human comprehension and is therefore open to a never foreclosed rational discernment and debate in which all can participate. This acknowledgement grants legitimacy to other faiths and holds open a space in which religious and non-religious alike can debate the nature of the common good” (Milbank and Pabst 2014).

According to this view, a Christian polity can concede religious liberties precisely because it is capable of recognising in the religious other some similarities with its own sense of the sacred and its integral vision of the cosmos. To reinstate the dominance of Christianity in politics, Milbank upholds, “is not a sectarian project but instead the only basis for political integration of Muslims and peaceful religious coexistence” (*ibidem*). Nonetheless, this does not mean that the acceptance of difference would bring to a wholesale recognition towards the specific truth claims and ethical stances a religious group might bring. On the contrary, it states the principle that “a Christian polity can only demand general respect for the *sacrality* of other religious communities insofar as they approximate Christianity’s own sense of sacrality (or are not incompatible with it)” (*ibidem*).

Various critiques are moved towards Milbank’s postsecularism. The first is that of the Derridean philosopher John Caputo. While himself a proponent of postsecularism, Caputo refuses Milbank’s take as obscurantism and virulent in its refutation of modernity and the Enlightenment (2011). According to his view, we must accept that the validity of any truth claim is inherently conditional, always declined in the *hic et nunc*, and that this makes it inevitably overlapping with others’ (2013). Religious diversity is the condition of our days. We cannot escape from the need of conceiving truth as unreservedly plural, to theologically work in favour of widening mutual understanding, and to opening ourselves to the epistemic possibility of being contradicted and changed in our most profound convictions. To admit the possibility

of being convinced by others' truth, however, cannot be posed as a pre-condition for entering in the public realm – being this truth that of secular reason or that of a participatory metaphysics founded on Christianity: “the faithful need to remind themselves that ‘others’ ... do not share and *cannot be expected* to share their ‘confessional faith’, their favourite body of approved propositions, any more than the faithful can be expected to share the approved propositional faith of others. Religious truth, the love of God, does not have to do with approved propositions” (2001: 112). By arguing in favour of a weak theology of love rather than the affirmation of dogmatic metaphysics (2006), religion is, for Caputo, nothing more than “the ‘virtue’ of being genuinely or truly religious, of genuinely or truly loving God, not the One True Religion, Ours-versus-yours. God is more important than religion, as the ocean is more important than the raft, the latter bearing all the marks of being constituted by human being” (2001: 113). Milbank’s foundational understanding of religion as a church must then be rejected for being culturally authoritative, politically imperialistic, and inherently violent. More pragmatically, it has to be rejected because it cannot be successful but through coercion and political submission.

The second critique comes from Joshua Ralston (2014), who denounces the dismissal of Islamic sources permeating Milbank’s thesis. According to Ralston, Milbank’s view on Islam is paternalistic and of colonialist nature. By scorning Islamic reflection on Shari’ah in context of religious diversity, brought for example by scholars such as Wael B. Hallaq (2013) and Khaled Abou El Fadl (2014), Milbank would reproduce Orientalist prejudice and bolster anti-religious politics of fear. Ralston argues that, by emphasising the otherness of Islam, Milbank would evade dialogue and impose Christian polity as unavoidable. His approach would overlook that Islamic theology possesses the internal resources for adapting Shari’ah to current times. More than for contingent reasons, the need of seriously dealing with Islamic knowledge is given by the fact that, throughout its millennial history, it has extensively reflected on pluralism and often developed successful models for interreligious cohabitation. By arguing for the superiority of Christianity, Milbank’s rhetoric would be naively monolithic and of violent nature. It has sinister “resonances with ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘extremist’ ideologies which may arguably contribute to discourses which can be seen to privilege prejudice in theology” (Hedges 2014: 25). What increasing religious diversity requires is not to abandon the search for nonfoundational forms of interreligious dialogue, as Milbank does, but rather the enduring of a “critical, honest and constructive exchange between Christian and Muslim movements and thinkers that might combat the challenges of globalized capital, the hegemony of the state and religious fundamentalism” (Ralston 2014).

The third critique is advanced by William Franke (2014). Although sympathetic with Milbank’s rebuttal of secularism, Franke’s suggestion is that in order to adequately respond to such a call Radical Orthodoxy is required to dismiss affirmative tones so as to fully embrace apophatic theology. He maintains that Milbank’s proposition is severely hindered by assuming his own theology to be definitive, by the “fatal

mistake of identifying truth and revelation with one's own human discourse rather than with beyond of all such discourses" (324). The project of a philosophy of the unsayable is to prefer to any sort of cataphatic affirmation of truth specifically in response to religious diversity. Franke's philosophy of the unsayable conceives pluralism as both unescapable and inherently favourable for the flourishing of a theology of peace:

"In terms of content, it has nothing particular or positive to offer, but methodologically it can play a key regulatory role, given the pluralistic situation of philosophy today, by offering a theory as to *why* this pluralism of discourses is necessary in the first place. For when different philosophies are repositioned and redefined as attempts to say what cannot be said, they reflect upon each other as reflecting a common ... something/nothing that they cannot say—except each in its own inadequate way, illuminating it in withdrawing, in taking its positive affirmations back, yet leaving a pregnant, indefinable 'sense' of what they were getting at. Different, even apparently contradictory, philosophies are revealed thereby as necessary to each other rather than as excluding and as having to suppress each other" (149).

We need pluralism, said differently, because only through pluralism we can fully open ourselves to the unsayable – which is ultimately the final horizon of any theology. Milbank's denial of secular neutrality is correct, Franke maintains, as the negation of transcendence cannot be accepted as the grammatical rule for evaluating the utter validity of specific truth claims. Nonetheless, his call for giving a hegemonic position to Christianity is equally contradictory: "does not every other theological logos have the same right and duty to assert its hegemony in defiance of the deluded claim to neutrality on the part of secular reason? Certainly Islam advances its own claim to hegemony" – asks Franke (229). In fact, "no philosophy has terms universally valid outside the context of the particular culture and history within which it has originated and evolved. Christianity, like any philosophy, is true for Milbank only on its own unique terms, which are incommensurable with those of other religions and their own inherent ways of thinking ... For there is no *naturally* authoritative account" (224).

Franke's conclusion is that only apophatic pluralism, rather than any form of confessionalism, Milbank's included, can solve this tension: "if we think apophatically and so rigorously critique all idolatry, hegemony can be legitimately claimed not for any narrative or doctrine, but only for the absolute that they aim to mediate in their own inevitably relative language" (229). In other words, no specific takes can be hegemonic, because they are all equally hegemonic in their referring to something that cannot be said, and all equally frail in their being unsayable. But how can such a pluralism be thought and enacted? Should we ever dismiss cataphatic theology and affirmative dogmatic pluralism and unfold religious diversity as truth *per se*? How can we surpass Milbank's establishmentarian exclusivism? For Franke, what we need is for theology to cultivate a pluralistic ethos conceiving competing truth claims as diverse but irreducible

attempts of pointing to the unsayable; this does not mean expunging cataphatic theologies or dogmas, but rather avoid subsuming their incommensurable truths within a finite ultimate horizon – whether supposedly neutral liberal secularism or a vestigial Christianity, or Islam, or whatever other theology could be ever assumed as the climax of them all. Apophatic pluralism is, in the end, the “awareness of the infinite as conditioning all our formulations and as the horizon of their sense” (328). It is not methodological atheist, for it takes all truth claims within the nova effect to be equally valid and altogether unsayable; it is not even agnostic, for it is “rather the moving away by negation from any position in which knowing can rest secure that is most characteristic of apophaticism. It does not remain within the limits of any knowledge or even of any definite and achieved state of unknowing—as if that way the question could be resolved once and for all agnostically” (199).

Apophatic pluralism “requires an unceasing, never satisfied effort of the imagination. This makes poetic imaginings of the cosmos and its Creator crucial for theological vision” (229). In other words, the unsayable cannot be said nor adequately thought, but only imagined. Postsecularism can be pluralist insofar as it ceases affirming its truth claims as teleologically valid for all – whether these claims are nonreligious or religious, Habermas’ secular public reason or Milbank’s vestigial Christianity. Postsecularism can be successfully pluralist, respectful of the particular and still aiming to fight inequalities through the forging of a cohesive public realm, only when it self-reflectively opens its discursive formulations, its doctrines and narratives, to the perpetual unfolding of the unsayable, which can be found nowhere but in imagination.

5. Postsecular geographies: the quest for a postsecular city

As emphasised throughout the chapter, religious diversity constitutes an epistemic and political challenge: the coexistence of clashing truth claims is addressed on the theological level, as within the fields of comparative theology and philosophy of religions, sociologically, by evaluating the extent at which it impacts religious participation and identities, and politically, by reflecting on how it can be positively accommodated in the formation of the public. Transversal to these debates, theories of the postsecular offer a radical shift in perspective for opening different angles through which approach the field both analytically, by deconstructing the categories of religion as a genus and the nonreligious, as well as politically, by discussing the effectiveness of political and social secularism while proposing alternative philosophical projects. The main question, both for theology and for political theory, is constituted by the search for neutrality: is there a neutral perspective through which finding a common ground between clashing truth claims? To what extent can they be compared or merged one with the other? Is it ever possible to find a balance between their specificity and the pragmatic need to put them in conversation? Said differently, is pluralism another situated parochial philosophical project for reducing irreducible

peculiarities to or is there a possibility for them to coexist peacefully while maintaining their own identities?

The importance of such a reflection is testified at the level of the city, where religious diversity is lived on the everyday basis. Religious diversity does not emerge in a vacuum, but within geographical processes. One of the most studied dynamics is, for example, how phenomena of globalization and the intensification of migratory flows produce religious diversity in complex ways, with migrant religions disputing the hegemony of once monopolistic confessions and soliciting the concurrent resurgence of orthodoxies and the proliferation of unorthodox theological apparatus (Kong 2010; Knippenberg 2007). Nonetheless, a myriad of scales is active and operates in the perpetual redefinition of both the religious and the urban. Urban studies can proficiently contribute to the interdisciplinary debate on the postsecular by reflecting on the agency of urban space in the definition of religious diversity and of postsecularism. It is then increasingly emphasised that “we cannot analyze conflicts related to the public manifestations of (migrant) religious movements in terms of religious presence in religiously neutral societies but that we should include in our discussions the fact that in each city, particular notions prevail about the form and shape that public religion should have” (Oosterbaan 2014: 592).

To critically reflect on the agency of space on religious diversity can enrich postsecular theories in two ways. First, by investigating the modes through which religious knowledge affects and is affected by space, postsecular theories would be able to unfold both the religious and space as plural and perpetually subject to mutual interactions. A renewed understanding of religion and the secular drawn on postsecular perspectives must inform and dialogue with a renewed understanding of territory – as a space lived by a plurality of human and nonhuman agents, material and immaterial beings capable of informing and put on move our conceptualisations of the real and our dwelling the landscape, within and beyond religious-nonreligious traditions and identities. Second, rethinking the nexus between religion and space may further address a philosophical project for more just urban policies and urban forms. The postsecular must explore the possibilities for building, all together, a just city – a city that is fully egalitarian, capable of stimulating and accommodating different spatial demands for the shape of the common good.

On the one hand, we are aware of what we should avoid: the ‘fundamentalist city’ (AlSayyad and Massoumi 2010; AlSayyad 2013), a city of religious enclaves that denies equal rights to the members of minority groups. Identified in disparate contexts, from Latin America to Asia, and across disparate religious traditions, from Islam to Hinduism and Christianity, the fundamentalist city is assumed as the result of complex interactions between (post)modernity, secularization and local appeals to the binding force of tradition, the city in which establishmentarian approaches directly cement forms of law making, urban governance and the production of the built environment. AlSayyad’s central argument is that urbanization across these contexts is not anymore contested as intrinsically hostile to the religious, but

rather referred to as the ideal scale through which the idea of an austere religious community can be pursued beyond that of the state. This city is not to be intended at any level as anti-modern; on the contrary, specific traits of modernity are selectively activated through a complex technology of power. The main characteristic is then that such a technology is disposed by fundamentalist groups with the purpose of “invoking an essentialist history based on belief in the inerrancy of a text or texts. Thus they justify a ‘nation of God’ or a ‘city of God’ by invoking scriptural truth” (AlSayyad 2013: 274). AlSayyad recognises to this city some recurrent attributes: first, the practice and adherence to minority religions can be limited or excluded by explicit policies or forms of latent stigmatization, for example by denying the access to specific services or spaces to its members; second, public rituals and codes of behaviour are defined through the lines of the majoritarian religion, to which minority groups are demanded to conform; third, there might be some forms of gender segregation; fourth, “it may be a city which normalises most of the above-mentioned forms of control or oppression in everyday life to the extent that the minority ceases to question them” (277).

On the other hand, we require the project of a ‘postsecular city’, a city in which exclusive secularism is contested by the emerging of successful pathways of interreligious dialogue within specific spaces. Some have used the expression of postsecular city for referring to a descriptive framework through which exploring matters of lived religiosity that exceed the conventional categorization of religion and nonreligion. Stevenson et al. (2010), for example, refer to the postsecular for a quantitative study on the diversification of belief and non-belief within the urban Sydney. Others investigate instead the embodied processes through which individual identities are collectively negotiated through the mobilisation of religious and nonreligious narratives (Olson et al. 2013; Hopkins et al. 2010; Vincett et al. 2012).

Nonetheless, the dominant approach of the notion is offered by scholars such as Paul Cloke, Justin Beaumont, Chris Baker, Jon May, and Andrew Williams. Such an approach is centered on the study of Faith Base Organizations (FBOs) as providers of welfare services in neoliberal contexts, organizations that tackles urban poverty and injustice through the crossing-over of religious and nonreligious dwelling of the world (Molendijk et al. 2010; Beaumont and Cloke 2012; Beaumont 2008; Cloke 2011; Cloke et al. 2005). Empirically grounded on selected case studies in UK and the Netherlands, but also variously linked to research in Turkey, Spain, Germany and Sweden (Dierckx et al. 2009), the postsecular city is here framed as the site in which the *rapprochement* between the secular and the religious happens. According to these geographers, the vitality of religiously motivated organization in supplying charitable welfare services reveals the emerging of new configurations of interfaith praxis as the tip of the iceberg of a groundbreaking renovation of both the urban and the religious. As forms of emancipatory encounter between religious and nonreligious modalities of inhabiting the world emerge, the postsecular city is the space in which *hope* and *love* erupt as forms of resistance to hegemonic capitalism and urban indifference

(May and Cloke 2013; Williams et al. 2012). Inspired by Caputo's translation of 'God' as 'love', the epicenter of the postsecular city has to be found in the emerging of theo-ethics praxis of generosity in place of dogma and sectarian confessional theologies. This transformation is observed primarily in Christian contexts. While references to other religious traditions are somehow neglected, the most recurrent argument is that FBOs are particularly effective in reverting pessimistic secularism through an ethos of engagement instilled by new configurations of different theologies. Here lies their main contribution and, as we may see, it is an account largely based on Habermas' postsecularism: for them FBOs' activities constitute a *discursive arena* in which translation and mutual learning are actively enacted through performances of care. Interfaith encounters happen through the active cooperation of diverse actors within confessional groups, that seem to put aside their theological differences in order to viscerally intervene in mitigating social injustices through work (Cloke 2011). According to postsecular geographers the main requirement that these organizations must have is that of being internally accessible for people of other religions and renouncing to any direct missionary activity:

“Here we can begin to witness the coming into being of Habermas' preconditions for a new postsecular consciousness – shared citizenship, mutual tolerance, reflexive transformation and crossover ethical narratives. The grasping of such postsecular possibility, however, also depends on a move away from fundamentalist religion that in turn places virtue in a new and positive relation to difference, and accepts faith-action as a form of service and *caritas* ‘without strings’ rather than being principally geared to conversion-oriented evangelism” (Cloke and Beaumont 2012: 41).

The postsecular city, according to this view, is intrinsically transformative and emancipatory precisely because it would encourage the translation of vernacular religious registers into something assumed as inherently just: “this ethos of engagement rejects universalist reason, and its inherent effort to convert the other into a set sense of rationality and respectability, preferring instead a more phenomenological appreciation of what is right in a particular context, blending virtue ethics with immanence” (Williams 2015: 195).

What is intended as ‘positive relation to difference’ is, in the end, the blurring of identities and the temporary suspension of specificities in the name of a shared project of care and love. It is in reason of such a commitment to charitable work that FBOs actors, being them religious or nonreligious, transit from spaces of belonging, intended as the comfort zones of confessional self-understanding, to spaces of becoming, assumed as intrinsically plural for the reason of being inhabited by members of different religious groups (Beaumont and Baker 2011). The postsecular shift from dogma to charitable praxis “points to the embodied performances of identity – religious or otherwise – in which local lived spaces can come to represent the potential for new formations of tolerance and agreement in place of previous

sectarian tendencies” (Clope and Beaumont 2012: 7). According to its proponents, the postsecular city constitutes, thus, a laboratory for new practices of social justice and for the development of new transformative social identities, presenting a “new, important and exciting conceptual apparatus in order to understand cities in ways that transcend the excesses of postmodern heterogeneity and nihilistic relativism with something fresh and new” (Beaumont and Baker 2011: 4).

However, such theories are not fully convincing, for they reiterate certain ambiguities found in the broader literature on the postsecular. First, some have argued that, despite their emphasis on the ontological transformation of religion, postsecular theorists have been able to add little to what has already been said by geographers of religion (Kong 2010; Ley 2011). This critique is two-fold. On the one hand, it rejects the emphasis on the novelty of these encounters: religion and the secular, different religions and different form of secularity, *always* interact and intermingle one with the other. On the other, it underlines the inner ethnocentrism of postsecular geographies, highlighting “the dangers of applying the discourse of postsecularization in a globalizing and totalizing way” (Kong 2010: 11). In an a-critical acceptance of the religious ‘love for the poor’, according to this critique postsecular geographers scarcely question what the action of FBOs is really capable of achieving, that is, the extent at which their services are effective in tackling social inequalities and are capable of responding to the demands of their users (Lancione 2014). What postsecular geographers fail to address is whether, rather than *ipso facto* contrasting secularist inequalities and intolerances, the action of religious groups may instead produce new asymmetries and social injustices. The extent to which voluntary work can successfully produce interfaith encounters is strongly dependent on established patterns of religiosity and belonging (Ruiter and de Graaf 2006). Nevertheless, the case-studies through which postsecular geographers’ theses are illustrated are circumscribed to scarcely religious contexts with a longstanding history of religious diversity, UK and the Netherlands. Controversies observed through the FACIT project in Turkey and Spain are rarely investigated in depth other than within more generic patrolling (Beaumont and Cloke 2012).

Second, contrary to their promises for prompting further politico-theological neutrality to state-religion encounters and policy-making, postsecular geographers are highly prescriptive concerning what religion is, should be, and how it must act when entering in the public realm. Their agenda, despite vigorously advocating for religious pluralism, is in fact essentially partisan: it endorses a specific trajectory, that of religiosity as a motivation for charitable work. Such an understanding pretends to transcend theological specificities, as it is naturalized as an unavoidable and inherently just pathway. Nonetheless, it underpins an understanding of religion strictly folded in Protestant theology and ethics, while offering too little for radical theological difference. Eclectically grounded on Habermas’ call for mutual learning and on Radical Orthodoxy’s recommendation for a vestigial role for the Christian mythos in praxis, their work uses a reductive approach to religion, by tautologically placing ‘love’ as the pure essence of *any* religious truth

claim. Religiously motivated public activity would be inherently just and progressive, for it would “reflect a significant and wider opposition to revanchism based on a theo-ethics of agape: a genuine openness to, and outpouring of, unconditional love towards and acceptance of the other” (May and Cloke 2013: 15). To belong to a specific religious group is not mandatory, as to operate in the social is implicitly an act of faith: “praxis can be thought of as a series of uncertain leaps of love into the hyper-real, a becoming-faith through the passionate yet potentially contradictory enactment of faith” (Cloke 2011a: 484). As such, love and being engaged in faith-based charitable enterprises constitutes altogether the pre-condition for religious contribution to be allowed to the public realm as publicly relevant, where the “potential clash between spiritual and political agendas is to some extent resolved by the prohibition placed by external statutory authorities on any proselytization of clients” (Baker and Beaumont 2011: 40). But isn’t such a prohibition another way of privatizing religion as mere belief?

Rather than neutral, postsecular geographers’ version of pluralism is another attempt of cataphatically presenting a specific theological preference of liberal kind as universal and inherently favourable. In this, postsecular geographers fail taking seriously how other religious trajectories differently address the relationships between the religious and the socio-political, the urban and the sensible itself. Two crucial examples need to be made: first, Islam theologies of care are presented in their literature mostly with the argument that charitable action would help preventing extremism (de Witte 2011; Baker and Beaumont 2011: 44-45), while any reflection on the complex ways the pillar of *zakat* has been elaborated in modern context is neglected. Second are of non-confessional forms of charity and social action, who also oppose to neoliberal inequalities and enact praxes of love and care through nonreligious ethics. While stressing that FBOs are “mostly Christian” (Cloke 2011b: 237), and that nonreligious people “seem to have lost the capacity to participate, to be inspired and to be enchanted” (241), postsecular geographers stress that a decisive “trait of this more public role for Christian religion is the ability to inculcate *hope*, by providing narratives about the injustices and calamitous orthodoxies of the current order” (247). Nonetheless, they hardly consider how religious views produced outside such specific branches of Protestant Christianity may frame or relate to other forms of public engagement, other forms for the religious to be a transformative actor in urban modernities. The work of postsecular geographers considers the mere deprivatization of certain religious groups as the proof of postsecular ethos in city life, neglecting a rigorous analysis around which groups and individuals are represented and which are not, which are accepted and supported by the state and which are not, and ultimately what chances they really have to impact social life, decision-making procedures and their contents, and public space – all crucial questions within broader postsecular debates. Whilst it is indubitable that religious activism in the city may positively impact matters of social justice, by providing services to disadvantaged people or elaborating narratives around what constitutes *justice* and *injustice*, it cannot be taken for granted that the activities and knowledge brought by religious groups are inherently equitable or *just* for the sole reason of being enacted

– and then of happening because of *unconditional love for the poor* (Williams 2015). Ultimately, postsecular geographers advance a specific inclusivist frame in which the primacy of a specific liberal take of Protestant Christianity and voluntarism is naturalized to the point of obscuring the asymmetries through which competing truth claims become part of the city.

Third, by centring their conceptualization of the rapprochement of the religious in the public city on mundane activities run by confessional groups variously motivated by faith, they ultimately neutralise the religious itself, confining it back again on the sphere of the private. Within such postsecular geographies, religion constitutes in fact a motivation for individuals and social groups to access an already formed public realm, a sphere pre-constituted by the pure secular and only re-animated, *ex post facto*, by the religious. More than simply on its theological specificity, the problem with such geographies lies thus on the fact that they seem to be, again, scarcely sensitive to difference, whereas crossover narratives of care and hope, interlinking different religious subjectivities and knowledges, are allowed to occur only under the authority of the secular and as a counter-power balancing the hegemony of the market. The public salience of religious groups is then made acceptable mainly by those criteria dictated by the majority and status quo – it can be accepted only when it does not disturb the proceeding of the secular, but when it tries to mitigate the injustices it produces from within. More radically, it can be said that the socio-political project underlying postsecular geographies still takes religion out from the constitutive, material and immaterial relations that produce the social as well as the city, and ultimately the religious itself. Postsecular geographers “mainly understand the city as a backdrop scenario” (Lancione 2014: 3064), and fundamentally neglect any critical analysis of how the postsecular encounters dialogue with the urban. Still thought through the rigid opposition of religious and the secular, this conceptualization of the postsecular city as the city in which religion theologically mitigates the injustices produced elsewhere by the secular fails to critically engage with how both religious and the secular are always being made, always deeply interrelated with market dynamics and power relations, always at the centre of a plurality of negotiation between a plurality of human and nonhuman agents. In accepting and reproducing Habermas’ discursive framework centred on a secular public reason, postsecular geographies seem to overlook that the religious overlaps with the secular in more radical ways than as a mere counter-power moved by ethics of love and care – it is embedded in the perceptual and in the revealed, in our bodily encountering with hierophanies lying in the sensible as well as in the more-than-sensible level. Such spheres can arguably resonate beyond work praxis and ethics addressed by Northern-European Protestant Christianity, while actively reshaping the boundaries of what religion and nonreligion are.

A fundamental question remains unattended: “where is the ‘city’ – with its more-than-human actants, contextual dynamics, power, affective atmospheres – in the ‘postsecular city’” (Lancione 2014: 3064)? How can the ways we perceive, imagine and perform the everyday city dialogue with patterns of

religiosity? If “even processes as seemingly non-theological as urban planning are laced with theological assumptions about the place of ‘religion’ in the built environment” (Tse 2014: 208), how can postsecular awareness impact the ways different actors access the city? How can principles of apophatic pluralism be applied on ways of thinking the future of the city and its reorganization?

What I suggest is that we need to further pluralize, and thus decolonize, the notion of postsecular *via* geography. In order to be fully inclusive, a renewed theory of the postsecular should apophatically retain itself from providing any authoritative groundings for social normativity on theological matters – with the intuitive but ever-moving sole limitation of physical coercion and domination. Rather than being limited to prescribing the modalities through which individuals and groups are accepted as public actors within a fully secular urban framework, postsecular theories should galvanize a new geophilosophy of difference and instigate a nonfoundational form of pluralism in city life and urban politics, which, I suggest, must be that of apophatic pluralism. In other words, postsecular theories must find their own specific pathway within urban theory in opening possible ways for cultivating epistemic difference and spatial justice in the everyday city. Rather than “totalizing inclusiveness”, they should promote a “radical openness” that “fosters polysemic pluralism and resists the great temptation of monolingism – the fantasy of one pure, perfect, original language” (Kearney and Zimmermann 2016: 205).

I have argued that postsecular thought is two-fold: on one side, it suggests the need for rediscovering the role played by metaphysics in the definition of the public and the common good; on the other, it normatively reflects on the modalities in which competing truth claims may be harmoniously accommodated within the public space. The postsecular city must be able to positively respond to the quest of a growing religious diversity over the shape of the city and the modalities through which truth claims are able to access the public realm and to be heard. By conceiving *space as a process* and the city as *the space of politics*, postsecular concerns require “not only a formulation of certain rights and the cultivation of the political among city habitants, but also a reconsideration of the spatial dynamics that make the city” (Dikeç 2001: 1790). Conditions of religious diversity call for theoretical and pragmatic tools positively balancing the respect of theological particularities with the excesses of identity politics that would balkanize worldviews confrontations. Equally, it is fundamental to avoid dropping the voices of religious minorities to irrelevance, by paying special attention to how majoritarian, more established or better-represented groups may cataphatically orientate democratic procedures and their contents, and leave for minority groups only marginal spaces in the city. The postsecular city should consider not only under which procedures or intellectual climate spatial injustices are produced, but also why they are injustices, whether they are legitimized by wider public opinion, and how can these be transformed by the enacting of a postsecular ethos. If geographers want to contribute to the shaping of just postsecular policies, they should thus critically reflect on the “faith in the efficacy of open communication that

ignores the reality of structured inequality and hierarchies of power”, and question whether “individuals may be free to express their thoughts to each other yet remain prisoners of existing social relations, institutions, and ideologies that cause them to accept programs contrary to their long-term interests” (Fainstein 2010: 30). As concisely posed by Doreen Massey, “*for* the future to be open, space must be open too” (2005: 12).

II

Geographies of religion and the problem of manifestation

1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the epistemic and political challenges solicited by religious diversity in the city. It reviewed the literature debate within geography's cognate fields of philosophy and theology, and the social sciences. The survey illustrated how the doctrine of secularism has been recently objected to for not being able to come to terms with the pluralization of religious demands within territorialities. Such a theoretical opacity is accounted for by a body of approaches called postsecular theories; variously allied to debates on postmodernity and postcolonialism, this reflection aims at inspiring a form of pluralism capable of accommodating competing truth claims in the shaping of the public. Nevertheless, the survey has shown that, rather than cohesive, these approaches are extremely diversified in their assessment of metaphysics and an ethics of difference. I have argued that apophatic pluralism can constitute a possible corrective to both Habermas' discursive proceduralism, demonstrated as a form of liberal inclusivism scarcely attentive to asymmetries of power, and Milbank's ecclesiology, criticized as an authoritarian exclusivism that sees no alternative between secular nihilism and a Christian establishmentarianism in which religious minorities are, however benevolently, theologically and politically subsumed.

The advantage of positing apophatic pluralism as a grammatical rule for rethinking pluralism is provided by the fact that, while arguing for the incommensurability of religious and nonreligious understandings of the real, apophasis states that none of them should be assumed as final or universally valid for the whole humankind. None of them, consequentially, should be posed as the sole ultimate basis for evaluating other cosmologies, or for structuring the public through morality or law-making. This assumption is based on a critique of discursive reason: the language through which we can express our truth claims, religious or nonreligious, is unable to fully grasp what they really signify, which is, by its essence, unsayable. In reason of this, the reality contents of worldings exceed the grasp of their discursive formulation: while the former is a unifying life-world, the latter is a socio-historical contingency that is variously disposed by the inhabitants of different ontologies. As a specific theological sensibility used through a wide variety of religious traditions, apophatic or negative theology argues that what every religion tries to offer an account of, the ineffable real, is ultimately the coming together of two horizons, an outward form immediately manifest, the exoteric, and an inward form which is instead always kept hidden, the esoteric – a principle that in this work I refer to through the Qur'anic articulation of *ẓāhir*,

the outward, and *batin*, the inward, reflected also in that of the seen (*shahada*) and the unseen (*ghayb*). Religion, then, is nothing but the provisional name we give to our attempts at naming the intermingling of the seen and the unseen – of the seen in the unseen, of the unseen in the seen. This articulation, as argued by both Seyyed Hossein Nasr and John Milbank, questions the gnoseological basis of social sciences and human geography: How is this complexity unfolded in the everyday world we inhabit? How can geographical knowledge have access to it? The way geography assesses these questions has a direct impact on the modalities through which the spatial demands of contending religious groups are framed and publicly accounted, for it directly structures the tension between reason and belief, the real and the unreal, transcendence and immanence, difference and identity. I suggest that the postsecular reflection provides valuable resources for addressing these questions while sharpening geography's theoretical perspectives and research praxis.

This chapter critically assesses human geographers' attempts of dealing with the relations between religion and space. Since others have provided extensive literature reviews on the field (Kong 1990; 2001; 2010; Holloway and Valins 2002; Yorgason and della Dora 2009), it circumscribes its focus on epistemic and methodological issues. Another significant limitation is that the review will be at large limited to post-WW2 geography, which leads to the exclusion of extraordinary materials such as the history of scriptural geography (Aiken 2009) or the historical geography of the tensions between scientific discourse and religion (Livingstone 1994). The specific focus of the chapter is the problem of manifestation, that is, on how the articulation of *batin* and *zahir* is addressed by contemporary geographical knowledge. It will reply to the following questions: What do geographical research study when approaching the religious? What tools does it use for grasping religious worldings? How can geographical knowledge contribute to broader religious studies? And, specularly, how can studying the spatiality of religion contribute to a further understanding of the experiences of space?

The first section of this chapter will introduce the epistemic and methodological foundations of contemporary geography of religion. In particular, it will focus on how it accounts the relationships between religion and the environment and those between the religious and the secular. I will here explore approaches for studying the religious and sacred space, conventionally framed within the opposition between politics and poetics of the sacred. The second section will be dedicated to the notion of sacred space, by discussing the opposition between Mircea Eliade's conceptualization and that of postmodern scholars. The section will be complemented with a recognition of the geographer Justin Tse's concept of grounded theologies, which represents a significant reframing of both Eliade's sacred space and postsecular critique to social sciences' neutrality. The third and final section will present three different takes on cultural landscape (Wylie 2007): the first derives from Carl Sauer's morphological approach, landscape as seen; the second from postmodern geographers of the new cultural geography school,

landscape as a way of seeing; the third coming from non-representational theories and post-phenomenological approaches. Every approach will be complemented with a reflection on the way it conceives imagination and religious landscape. My argument will be that geography, rather than privileging either one or the other ends of the spectrum, must be able to forge a theory capable of more coherently come to terms with the articulation of the seen and the unseen.

2. Geographies of religion between the secular and the sacred

According to Park (2005) the field of modern geography of religion is led by two opposing approaches. The first deals with the spatial forms through which religion gets manifest in the world of bodies by focusing on its socially constructed materiality and temporality. The second investigates instead the role of religion in believer's lived experience of space. While the first approach observes the social and historical spatial forms produced by religious groups and institutions, the latter is engaged with an individual experience that exceeds the domain of the material while offering sense to it. Rather than innocent, the choice between one approach rather than the other reflects a precise take on the ontological status given to the religion-nonreligion spectrum and, furthermore, on what ultimately matters in the formation of the real. Said differently, each approach entails specific epistemic and ontological implications about both the religious and the unsayable, variously reflected on how geographers define their object of study and on how truth claims might access the public. The following section introduces the field of geography of religion and briefly discusses how different scholars have differently framed the articulation of the seen and the unseen.

2.1 Religion and the environment: the principle of reciprocity

A taxonomic definition of contemporary geography of religion is that of the study of the interactions between religion and the environment. The epistemic vocation of earlier contributions to the field has been mostly descriptive and naively deterministic (Kong 1990; Buttner 1980). On the one hand, some have been preoccupied with the ways in which environmental features affect theological doctrines and practices, rituals and liturgies. This perspective dissects religious cosmologies by seeing how these might reflect the specific physical characteristics of the geographical contexts in which they developed and flourished – for example, how “in Norse mythology, heaven was a place of warmth and hell a place of cold and mist; but in the religions of Palestine and Arabia, hell is a place of heat-of eternal fire” (Whitbeck 1918: 320). On the other, and even more diffusely, geographers have been focused on the impact of religious doctrines on the earth's surface as tangible elements of the environment or as motivation for its transformation. Through such lenses geographies of religion have been capable of observing a wide variety of objects of study. One has been how certain places are venerated as ‘sacred’ by specific religious communities, for being transformed, adapted, and adopted as ritual spaces or pilgrimage sites. Another has been focused on the contrary on the erection of ‘officially sacred sites’ such as temples, churches,

mosques, musallayat, synagogues, eruvs, monasteries, missions, cemeteries, and so forth. Such places are examined in two ways. First, as the physical expression of religious traditions, as theologically grounded architectures in dialogue with socio-historical phenomena. Second, they are considered for their capacity of orienting the organisation of human settlements within the boundaries of town and villages or in rural areas. Another major object of study has been the diffusion patterns of religious traditions, communities, and sites. Such a perspective has made use of quantitative methods and mapping – a research approach that still comprises the most distinct contribution of geography to broader studies on religion (Warf and Winsberg 2008; Knippenberg 2007; Williams and Wright 2015; Stevenson et al. 2010; Havlíček and Hupková 2013). What these approaches share is a deterministic view on how religion and space affect one another. Relations are, at this point, reduced to one-way causality. The objects under enquiry, being either the agency of natural features on theologies or the processes of adaptation to the physical environment by religious communities, are selected by the researcher as self-evident; they are, in other words, apodictically assumed as religious by an epistemically detached observer.

Nevertheless, many have lamented geography's paucity of theoretical sharpness, for "geographies of religion have often been mere catalogues of artifacts and mentifacts" (Levine 1986: 437). If earlier attempts were focussed on mono-directional relationships between the environment and the religious, whatever the direction, more recent studies have instead advised the need to engage with the reciprocal interactions between the two, for studying how different religious phenomena affect and at the same time are affected by different space-times (Kong 1990; Cooper 1992; Buttner 1980; MacDonald 2002). Through the acknowledgment of this principle, geography shifts from descriptive tasks to critical interpretation. The theoretical and epistemic significance of re-centring the field on the principle of reciprocity is reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, geographers cease understanding the environment, locality and place as mere backdrops upon which religion gets manifest. They are instead assumed as active forces in the constitution of truth claims, whereas "the sensory interactions between human bodies and natural elements of fire, air, earth, and water are seen as essential in the quest for wholeness (holiness) and health that lies at the hearth of most world religions" (Buttimer 2006: 198). On the other hand, geographers are able to positively capture the contextual variability of religious phenomena. Both the categories of space and religion are now intended as relational, mutually transformed by the relationships they enact. Geography transits "from the modernist regime of collecting, classifying and comparing data towards seeing religion as a plural, dynamic, and engaged part of a complex social environment or habitat that is globally interconnected and suffused with power" (Knott 2009: 159).

By centring the field on the dialectics of environmental elements and religion new areas of research and new objects of study are introduced. Geographers become increasingly receptive towards the multiplicity

of scales in which religion might be produced and find expression, from the global to the space of the body – with a research agenda extending from geopolitics (Agnew 2006) to the embodied production of subjectivity (Gokariksel 2009; 2012). Such a shift draws attention to those geographies of religion overdoing the ‘official sacred spaces’, for “religious buildings do not have a monopoly of sacredness” (Kong 1993: 355; 2001). In short, geographers become finally attentive to the agency of religion across a plurality of spaces: for example, in urban governance (Garmany 2010), in counselling and psychotherapy (Bondi 2013), in technology (Kong 2001), in nature, conservation and architecture (Jazeel 2013), in mediascapes (Shelton et al. 2012), and so forth. The location of religion is not anymore a discrete point on the map but rather an ever-moving spatial entanglement in which practices of sacralisation are disclosed in concert with a multiplicity of visible and invisible forces (Holloway and Valins 2002). By reconsidering the relations between space and the religion as dynamic, geography is finally able to acknowledge the heterogeneity of forms and agencies with which religion and space are actualised.

2.2 Defining religion, beyond universality and the religious-secular dichotomy

Kong (1990) outlines how upholding the principle of reciprocity of religion and the environment heralds the “coming of age” of the field of geography of religion. This becomes finally emancipated from ‘religious geographies’, “deemed to be more a ‘religious’ pursuit than a ‘scientific’ one” (356). As she concisely summarises, a new configuration of the field as a whole emerges:

“Geographical research on religion reflects the key concepts and approaches in geography: the spatial, the environmental, the landscape, and the place-centered. The spatial is manifest in mapping exercises, in the exploration of diffusion patterns, and more recently, in spatial politics. Human-environmental relationships are mediated by religion, such as in environmental determinism and religious ecology. The landscape approach embraces explorations of religious landscape politics, but also religious landscape imprints in descriptive and symbolic terms. The focus on place recognizes the meaningful personal relationships between people and place, after the style of humanistic geographers, but also interrogates the significance of place in community building. The role of physical place in a world increasingly mediated by technology also constitutes a subject of inquiry” (2004: 374).

According to this sketch, geography of religion reaches its maturity precisely as it starts to critically interrogate religious phenomena and their spatial layering. Religion is approached by evaluating the different ways in which its elements interact with the environment for being spatialized; altogether, space is observed as it actively impacts the territorialisation of truth claims’ contents and formal expression. Religion becomes an entirely geographical problem, for “in the same way that race, class and gender have become primary axes of analyses in geography and other social science disciplines, religion must not be a residual category” (2001: 228). This disciplinary shift demands the sharpening of concepts and

methodologies, which are generally transferred and adapted from cultural and social geography. The scientificity of the field is, for Kong, guaranteed by the definition of a clear-cut taxonomy and of a set of methodological approaches that allow the geographer to neatly categorize the various elements shaping religious phenomena and space, while offering the possibility of systematically expose the research findings.

Nevertheless, what remains unclear, paradoxically, is indeed the central category it claims to proceed towards: that of religion. What do geographers really refer to when speaking about religion? The definition of religion has been a longstanding dilemma for social sciences – with the predominant uses being that of religion as a set of beliefs and meanings, religion as identity, religion as a social institution, religion as discourse, and religion as practice (Woodhead 2011). As it has been said in the previous chapter, stringent sociological taxonomies have been widely disputed by postsecular scholars; after the work of Asad, Taylor and Milbank, it seems increasingly problematic to understand religion as a genus, a system of elements distinctly manifest upon space. The historian Jonathan Z. Smith (1988: xi) maintains, for example, that religion is a sphere entirely moulded by scholarly labour, a notion that “has no independent existence apart from the academy ... created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization”. More than an innocent scholarly praxis, to define religion has an effect on practices of governance; as demonstrated by Beckford (1999), for example, it actively regulates the access of groups and communities to public life, for pragmatic reasons such as tax exemptions and being included in school curriculums, or for being included to interfaith tables within deliberative processes.

Geographers and social scientists face the difficulties of defining religion on two levels. First, the concept of religion has been widely contested for its pretended universality. Many have addressed that its global ubiquity needs to be correlated to historical processes of cultural and political colonization, through which the structural characteristics of Christianity have been uncritically applied to other non-Christian systems for reasons of classification instrumental to less innocent practices of domination (Fitzgerald 2000; Beyer 2006; Josephson 2012). According to Masuzawa (2005) the scientific enterprise of religious studies has deprived a plurality of integrated takes on the real of their utter incommensurability, reducing their vital cosmological systems to a grid of common requirements and components to be evaluated on the basis of the one true religion and its complementary secular reason. As the invention of the notion of ‘world religions’ was made, the “European Christian project finds its full realization ... dividing the world between the West, with its aspirations to universality, and the orientalist ‘rest’, with their localized, nationalized, and racially exclusive religions” (Tse 2014: 207-208).

A response comes from the geographer Adrian Ivakhiv (2006), according to which geographers must actively contribute to de-essentialise the definition of religion by fully disclosing its internal diversity.

They regardless should persist using the term ‘religion’ by referring to it with quotation marks, while methodologically trying to make space for insiders’ conceptualisations to emerge. For the consistency of ‘religious’ phenomena cannot be taken for granted, geographers should rather focus on “the geographies of specific kinds of practices that happen to have become associated with the historically malleable signs of the religious and the sacred” (169). In other words, geographers should persevere doing geography of religion by enhancing their self-awareness about the intrinsic variability of ‘religion’ across different geographical contexts, traditions, socio-cultural groups, and individuals. More radically, it is precisely the variability of the conceptualisations of religion that geographers must assume as the primary object of their study. Such self-awareness promises new pathways for research beyond “human geographer’s colonizing narratives” (Yorgason and della Dora 2009: 202). Said differently, geographers are called to be self-critical about their own research’s positionality, that is, to be self-reflexive about the truth claims through which they articulate the epistemic categories they refer to. Moreover, they must actively engage with different insiders’ views, by assuming critical openness as their prior epistemic scope. By taking religion as an open-ended category articulated through a variety of time-spaces, human geography can ultimately entail its own specificity within broader studies on religion (Henkel 2005). In virtue of its specific attention to the constitutive agency of space and place, geography is in fact better equipped than other disciplines for addressing the extent at which religion varies with different space-times.

Second, many have objected that the genus of religion is entailed on very unstable bases, that is, in opposition to what is assumed as its negation, the secular. As extensively demonstrated in the previous chapter, the specification of the conceptual fields of religion and the secular is increasingly contested for being the ideological product of the doctrine of secularism. According to the sociologist David Martin (1969: 3), “the religious and the secular are in one sense opposites but in another they are intertwined. There is almost nothing regarded as religious which cannot be secular, and almost no characteristics appearing in secular context which do not also appear in religious ones”. The religion-secular dichotomy is, then, assumed as the result of dynamics of functional separation produced by secularity, a process through which a once unified societal cosmos has been fragmented in clear-cut categories and differentiated spheres – such as temporal-spiritual, private-public, real-unreal, reason-faith, rational-irrational (Asad 1993; 2003).

Many authors have objected that the religion-secular opposition is incapable of accounting for how the boundaries of the two concepts are enormously variable and porous. On one side, a postcolonial argument suggests that they make sense mostly to modern Western nation-states and their inhabitants, whilst considerably evanescent in different geographical contexts (Carter Hallward 2008; Bangstad 2009). The indiscriminate use of religion-secular as an epistemic category is often condemned as instrumental to the colonial project, as it perpetrates the doctrine of secularism via pretensions of scientific neutrality:

“what is colonial about the word ‘religion’ is that ‘religions’ in colonized territories have been read through universalistic lenses that emphasize the private experience of interior transcendence, the primary of cognitive belief over practice, and their irrelevance to public geographies” (Tse 2014: 208). A strong argument is advanced by theories on multiple modernities, according to which the prediction that religious thought would globally recede in favour of a homogenising process of modernization must be dismissed as fallacious and ideologically imperialistic for the precise reason that modernization is differently built across different geographical contexts (Hefner 1998; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Spohn 2009). On the other side, as I have reported in the previous chapter, a clear-cut distinction between religious and nonreligious spheres is considered as empirically problematic even for what concerns individuals of supposedly homogeneous Western contexts (Lee 2015; Quack 2014). Beyond the level of individual belongings, many have demonstrated that religious doctrines and structures are relationally interlocked with social formations conventionally assumed as ‘secular’, such as the market, politics, individual and collective identities, and so forth (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2000; Flint 2010; Lynch 2014). At the same time, it has been illustrated how ‘secular’ spheres are deeply impacted by implicit religious views in a number of studies inaugurated by Max Weber notorious take on Calvinism (Mian 2008; Baker and Miles-Watson 2010).

How are religion and nonreligion relationally assembled from a geographical perspective? The solution to this dilemma is again that of being increasingly self-aware and self-critical about their fuzziness. Such awareness offers to geography an advantage on other disciplines, since it can better access to the interweaving of the religious and the secular as it variably occurs within variable space-times. As suggested by Ivakhiv, geography of religion should investigate the processes through which “the spatial distribution of *religious* sacrality (and interreligious profanity) map onto the distribution of other sacralities (and profanities), such as the ethnic and national” (2006: 171). Said differently, “if indeed secularization and ‘the secular’ are cogenerated with ‘the religious’ through space ... then the ways that we study religion in and through society, politics, and history require an engagement which potentially disturbs the categories of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ and their presumed meanings and affiliations” (Olson et al. 2013: 8). Religion, nonreligion, the secular, reason and modernity, can all be studied by geography as relational ideas, discourses and phenomena, variable and plural by their own nature.

2.3 Is religion a social form or an experience?

Throughout its recent disciplinary development, geography of religion seems then to have moved in two directions. On the one hand, it has apprehended the relation between the religious and the environment as mutual, wherein the former affects and is altogether affected by the latter. On the other, it has started conceiving both the religious and the secular as open-ended categories, not to be assumed as a priori but to be negotiated with space, places and their inhabitants. Despite this uprising awareness, the ways

religion and the secular are framed within empirical research is still vastly problematic and often incoherently addressed. This section introduces then the following questions: In what ways is religion pertinent to their studies? And what conceptions of the environment and of space are employed?

First, for many the religious must be understood and studied as a social phenomenon, a distinct element found in space; said differently, religion is *something* that can be objectively located and mapped as such. Religion is studied as a social institution capable of entering in dialogue with other social institutions, for legitimating or contesting them; research is circumscribed on doctrinal apparatus and confessional groups as they act on the public. A foundational work is provided by Levine (1986), who contends that religion is an active agent of the cultural landscape precisely because it is, at its very core, a socio-cultural agent: in his own words, religion is essential to geography because it is “quintessentially a social phenomenon” (436). Drawing on a Marxist taxonomy and methodology, the scope of geography of religion are here bounded to the historical study of how organized religions impact power relations, the formation and institutionalization of ideologies, modes of production, and class structure – wherein “the action of religious institutions may be understood within this context of class interest and class struggle” in promoting social change or political conservatism (436). Assumed as politically informed ideologies, religions “claim the exclusive right to interpret ultimately significant matters, and they pursue a range of social aims and practices determined by their own social organization or by conflict with other institutions or by vested interests within its body of experts” (434). Through this perspective, the geographer is called to unveil the authority of religious hierarchies over the public, whereas “understanding the particulars of the institutionalization of a religious ideology will help the geographer attain a fuller understanding of the socio-environmental impact of religion and its impact on religion” (435).

According to such an approach, the political ascendance of religion is particularly effective for it is founded on an extra-sensible sources of legitimation, constituted by revealed truths and immaterial forces. Religions are “important because they ground socially defined reality in ultimate reality. To attack these legitimations is to risk conflict with primeval forces. The religious institution can be profoundly alienating as it seems separate from human control” (435). Even though religious knowledge forges its claims on the interaction of the sensible and the super-empirical, according to this approach geographers must limit their focus only on the exoteric, on the ways in which such a knowledge is manifest within the empirical; what counts for the geographer is its agency on the social. Whilst religious doctrines are formulated in reference to the extra-sensible as revealed by prophets and visionaries, geographers of religion must limit their focus on the spaces in which these become fully manifest and accessible for all, not only to the religious person but also to the non-believer. Albeit decisive for the constitution of religious truth claims and doctrinal apparatus, the *batin* is dismissed as irrelevant to social research insofar as it is not reified in its *zahir*, in an exterior, tangible form.

This disciplinary orientation is extraordinarily significant. Valins (2000; 2003) focuses for example on ‘institutionalised’ religion, that is, on individuals’ practices of socialisation centred on doctrinal codes, by observing the spatial enactment of regulative discourses produced by temporal religious apparatus. His research focuses on the acts of construction of Eruvs run by Orthodox Jews living in United Kingdom, observed as political attempts of revitalising Talmudic regulations within postmodern cityscapes. McNeill (2003) reflects on the urban planning negotiations between the Vatican and Rome City Council in occasion of the Holy Year of 2000. Throughout this angle he covers the intermingling of two separate sovereign bodies within the same territorial boundaries, the temporal and the spiritual here allied in order to pursue together their own distinct aims – in a “fusion of a civic boosterism ... with the Vatican’s need to ‘territorialise God’” (553). A similar agenda has been variously endorsed by a wide geopolitical research (Sturm 2013), for example in studies on the global politics of Catholicism for restoring and enhancing Christendom (Agnew 2010; Korf 2006), on the role of the Church of England in post-9/11 warsapes (Megoran 2006), on the nexus between Buddhist reincarnation and Tibetan politics (McConnell 2013), on postcommunist politics of memory and sacred space (Pae et al. 2010; Havlicek and Hupkova 2013), or on the siting of Mosques and Churches in ongoing Christian-Muslims relations (Emmett 2009).

Other scholars have investigated the political significance of theological formulations by looking at how religion works as a moralizing force on public actors and social institutions. In his call for geography to be keen on receiving theoretical contributions from religious traditions, Pacione (1999) argues in favour of the fundamental role played by theologically grounded ethics for social justice. According to this view, religiously inspired ethics can positively impact the agenda of political geographers. Furthermore, Pacione suggests that a Christian turn can help making human geography as a whole more relevant within public debate and policy-making activities. Since “the failure of the Marxist-inspired brand of relevant human geography appears to have left the field to the forces of capitalism” (127), this take suggests that human geography should search for universal moral bases on religious knowledge, specifically within the social doctrine of Protestant Christianity (see Clark 1991). A similar understanding is advanced from non-confessional stances by Lily Kong (2010), who argues that human geographers can capture today’s importance of religion by looking at the responses it formulates to global shifts such as ageing population, global warming and environmental crisis, uneven urbanisation processes, and uneven migration flows. Said differently, according to this view religion matters insofar as it is capable of transcending the immaterial realm of the doctrinal for directly affecting the domain of the secular.

A limit of these conceptualisations lies on the fact that, still, they entail the religious as ontologically distinct from, and superimposed upon, the secular: despite their occasional interactions, for these geographies religion and the secular remain enclosed within entirely discrete fields strictly separated one from the other. Within these studies the definition of the two and their boundaries is taken as self-evident.

Religion is whatever can be variously referred to the doctrinal apparatus or social action of organised religions. The secular is instead whatever is *not* religion. What counts as geographical are ultimately the actions through which organized religious groups transit from the private realm to which they belong to the public, which is instead the realm of the secular. As acutely noted by Tse (2014: 205), for this approach “religion needs to be shown to be relevant to these broader social processes that will continue to proceed regardless of whether the sacred engages them or not”. The peril of the geographer is that of dissecting and categorising the religious as an entirely social affair, to be analysed through scientific indicators assumed as nonreligious and hence as epistemically neutral. What is problematic here is that, by dismissing the inward dimension of religion as irrelevant, geographers actively contribute to the formation of a specific truth claim according to which the extra-empirical is expunged from the everyday as the radical other. In other words, by approaching religion uniquely from its exoteric dimension, geographers contribute at strengthening the same narrative of secularity that they often aim to contrast as ideological and fallacious.

A second approach considers religion, not as a social form, but as a lived experience (Cooper 1992). Terry Slater (2004: 245) laments his frustration as a Christian with the field of human geography: “Religion has remained on its margins; a personal affair, sitting uneasily with the secular humanism of the social sciences and modernism more generally”. For him, the requirements for neutrality dictated by positivist paradigms originate a schizophrenic condition for the researcher. Two worlds mirrored by two different personas, that of the scientist and that of the believer, overlap and collide. Nonetheless, for geographical discourse to be valid and scientifically reliable, the religious must be muted and reduced to epistemic irrelevance. Scientific habits for classification, measuring and comparing force the religious social scientist to become himself a vehicle of secularity, for religion becomes a specialised niche separate from an over-arching secular whole. Despite many geographers’ ambitions to fully come to terms with the fact that religion gives sense of the everyday lived experience of the real to a vast number of individuals, including themselves, “few geographers speak as ‘insiders’ when writing about religious geography from whatever faith tradition” (246).

Slater’s allegation is provocative: how can the geographer cope with his/her own spirituality and religious belonging when doing research? Is the position of the outsider the only one the geographer can acceptably look at the real from when doing geography? Slater’s proposition is then to make the two worlds throughout which his own self floats, at least, converse, “to fuse the two previously separated experiences of being a geographer and a person of faith; to fuse the two language realms of those experiences” (246). In a radically different vein to the understanding of religion as a social form, he frames it as an uncanny open-ended way of thinking about the unseen and sensuously encountering being. Rather than as a social agent operating within secular processes of legitimation of power, this approach assesses

the religious as an experiential whole felt on the register of emotions and affects. Not necessarily 'private', Slater's religion lies anyway on the autobiographical and the individual, on how "'meetings with God' are profoundly moving, have become part of my identity in the world of here and now, and are one of the ways I make sense of my world" (247). An experience of the numinous 'out there' that is, nonetheless, "unlikely to be replicated in others" (251). It is, still, belief.

Others have since explored the religious on the experiential level. Such studies emphasize affectual and emotional dispositions, and the spaces between insiders' relations to enchanted space-times and autobiographical interpretations (Henkel 2011). The former has been explored, for example, through the angle of tourism and pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner 2010; Rowley 2012), geographies of development (Sanderson 2012), music and performativity (Saldanha 2005), sacred architecture and community building (Finlayson 2012). The latter has been investigated in works on death, grief and the constitution of place through liminality (Maddrell 2009; Maddrell and della Dora 2013), or on the making of an ethos of engagement (Holloway 2013). In sum, while the approach of religion as a social form circumscribes its attentions on the exoteric, this second approach is instead also attentive to the other end of the spectrum, the esoteric. In order to give voice to individual perceptions of the religious uncanny, these studies privilege ethnographic methodologies such as storytelling and participant observation. Insiders' experiences are often conveyed by using poetic registers, in order to provide a non-representational account of the unsayable. The vivid experience of the researcher is often accounted for as integral to the research praxis and its findings. A considerable part of these works is in fact dedicated to problems of positionality, trying to explore how research perspectives are negotiated by putting the two worlds in conversation, that of the neutral researcher and that of a situated individual whose perception of the real is given within his own truth claims.

A number of these studies suggest that geographers should pay more attention to spirituality and spiritual practices. For Gergan (2015) it is only through a focus on spirituality that geography can fulfil its post-humanist promises, by finally accessing to a plurality of ontologies and sentient lifeworlds. For Bartolini et al. (2017) a specific focus on spirituality would finally eradicate secularity from the geographical agenda, while supporting a research able to rather fully discover how "religion, spirituality, superstition, magic and the like are actually the stuff out of which modernity has been built, alongside the more usual suspects of progress, reason and science" (13). According to these arguments, by looking at spirituality rather than at religion geography can finally reassess the space of religion as non-discrete and non-finite.

A comparison between an approach that regards religion as a social form and one that conceives religion as an individual experience emphasises the wide divergence of scopes within the field. For the former, geography is a scientific effort called to offer entirely verifiable accounts on the world. It is capable of doing so precisely by limiting its focus on the directly manifest, on the external realm of the material, to

be found within the sphere of the immediately sensible. Geography needs to be secular, for what matters is what emerges within the public realm. Moreover, the operative definition of religion is that of a social category constituted by formalised institutions and social groups. For the second approach, geography is instead demanded to inquire how the religious is felt and embodied as an invisible but yet ostensible force capable of shaping individuals' lived understandings of space. Such an approach evolved from a different ontology of religion. While the former perspective assumes religion as a specific category between others – for example gender, class, ethnicity, the market, ideology, each with a specific and circumscribed agency – the approach centred on the experiential level considers it as a totalising inner dimension capable of orientating sensuous perception and our consciousness. The difference between the two can also be registered on how they consider space, with the first setting religion as a bounded spatial object and the second operating at the level of the self in conversation with the flowing of the elemental. For the former, space is a dimension instituted outside the processes that make religion; space has to be taken as given, a dimension to be assumed as substantial by the believer as well as by the non-believer. For the latter, space is instead perpetually produced alongside ultimate meanings and understandings of the real – it is a lived domain religiously felt within the everyday. By focusing on lived religiosity rather than on its tangible reflection upon social phenomena, approaches to geography of religion speculating on the experiential are sensitive to the incommensurability of all-encompassing practices of worlding; in trying to come to terms with the agency of the extra-sensible upon the sensible, they raise questions about the epistemic bases of geographical knowledge as a whole.

3. Sacred space: substantial vs. relational approaches

The epistemic contraposition between religion as a social form and religion as an experiential phenomenon can be better illustrated by looking at the ways in which one of the central concepts used by social sciences for studying the religious, that of sacred space, can be formulated. Although the two are often indistinctly used, the term 'sacred' does not coincide with 'religious'. The word derives from the latin *sacer*, with the twofold meaning of an object or person either consecrated to devotion or banned from the community and excluded from sacrifice. This apparent antinomic relation reveals that the sacred is "analogous to the ethnological notion of taboo: august and damned, worthy of veneration and provoking terror" (Agamben 1998: 73). In other words, the term is strictly associated with radical separateness: the sacred is ultimately intended as the quality of whatever or whoever is considered as set-apart from a specific society by that society itself (Evans 2003). Across the social sciences a milestone was posed by the definition coined by Durkheim. According to Durkheim, the sacred exceeds the domain of the purely religious and is instead "the name for the transcendent reality to which religious experience points and to which it responds"; be it either natural or supernatural, it cannot be seen "as a religious object but as a category of world classification and ritual behaviour" (Paden 1991: 12). As such, it is the religious that is founded on the sacred rather than the other way round. As summed up by Danièle

Harvieu-Léger (2000: 44), “the sacred swamps and envelops the definitions provided by traditional religions and long imposed on society. It further swamps the new forms of institutionalized religion perceived in the new religious movements. Above and beyond every systematization to which it will give substance as it has done in the past, it refers to a specific reality which is exhausted in none of the social forms it takes”.

The sacred may be otherworldly or thisworldly; in any case, it is expressed and actualized between the realm of the visible and that of the invisible. Pivotal in the structuring of the world and the real, it is assessed in its spatial dimension under the expression of sacred space. Analogically from that of sacred, the notion of sacred space exceeds that of a specific place formally consecrated by organized religions. Extensively explored by disparate disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, theology, and philosophy of religion, the notion of sacred space has been drawn in contemporary social sciences upon the systematic opposition of two different understandings (Chidester and Linenthal 1995; della Dora 2011).

The first is defined as ‘substantial’ or ‘essentialist’. Grounded on the works of Rudolf Otto and Gerard Van der Leeuw, it finds its sharpest refinement in the work of the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1987). This approach considers the sacred space as ontologically given, the locus in which the sacred manifests itself. The sacred is spatialized through the spontaneous irruption of hierophanies, manifestations of an ultimate reality brought within the sphere of the sensible. Through universal symbologies, hierophanies reveal the sacred and, with the sacred, the non-temporal foundations of being, of the world and of human condition. The emergence of the sacred produces an interruption in the smooth space of the everyday, by contrast defined as ‘profane’.

The first characteristic of the sacred space is then that it is set apart from ordinary space. Qualitatively connoted as sacred by the threshold in virtue of which it marks its separation from the profane, it has the capacity of offering the experience of uncanny supernatural powers, of the numinous as such. Its second main characteristic is that the experience of the sacred fixes a point of orientation for its worldly surrounding, deemed otherwise as homogeneous. Hierophanies have the final capacity of producing space for “the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center” (21). Such a point defines an *imago mundi* apodictically separated, distinct and ontologically superior to the natural environment it consequentially funds. Opposed to the chaos of profane space, it becomes the only ‘real’ space; by superposing an order to its surrounding cosmos, sacred space makes the profane itself as ‘real’. Third, sacred space fixes an *axis mundi*, for the space-time of the hierophanic eruption opens up the possibility for communicating with the ‘wholly other’. In other words, sacred space connects different levels of reality: since it is the locus of manifestation of another order of reality, it testifies “the conviction that the actual worldly order

is neither the best nor the only one” (Rosati 2016: 87). This order can be immanent or transcendental, theistic or atheistic, but is always characterized as something *more* and *other* than the sensible. It is found and experienced within the sensible; nevertheless, it does not fully belong to or even originate from it. According to this perspective, religion is the name given to the diverse ways through which humans make experience of the more-than-sensible structures that regulates the dichotomy of sacred and profane.

The second perspective is defined as ‘situational’ or ‘relational’. Strictly linked to postmodernist approaches in social sciences, this perspective subverts the substantial conception for being tautological and analytically naive. In reason of its conceptual opacity, the substantial conceptualisation of sacred space is criticised as ineffectual; in other words, it is likely to not be of any use for the social scientist. Since “nothing is inherently sacred” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 6), the situational approach frames the sacred space as the product of myriad social and political negotiations. Rather than the manifestation of a spontaneous eruption of hierophanies, the sacred space is assumed as the product of human labour, of practices of sacralisation and desecration unfolded in ritual performances and ritualised disciplines of the body, in policies and culture. Importantly, it is the result of the perpetual interweaving of discourses and narratives of the sacred and the profane. Under this perspective, sacred space is intended as a space produced in conversation with the profane and, ultimately, *by* the profane. Rather than focusing on the formal characteristics of already sacralised places, postmodern geographers of the religious are concerned with the socio-political conditions under which the sacred is settled by social groups upon arbitrary spaces (Smith 1992). The processes of constitution of sacred space are observed in socio-political conflictuality that concerns the very acts of production of space. According to this view, sacred space is contested for the precise reason of being spatial, since “no objects can occupy the same point in space” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 19). It is then produced through processes of contestation, of inclusion and exclusion, of claims and counter-claims of ownership. Ultimately, sacred space represents the nexus of disparate interests and power issues negotiated within its production.

According to its advocates, the most significant import of this approach lies on its epistemic and methodological implications for social sciences praxis:

“In keeping with an Eliadian approach to sacred space, the geographer’s observation is framed entirely in the passive voice. Human agency, including all the ritual, interpretative, social, economic, and political labor that goes into consecrating space, is erased by attributing all the action to ‘holy places’ and ‘gods and spirit’. *They* become sacred; *they* anchor emotions; *they* create and mould a mythological environment. Instead of contributing to an analysis, these assumptions merely announce a mystical theology of sacred space... The most significant levels of reality in the formation of sacred space are not ‘mythological’ categories, such as heaven,

earth, and hell, but hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dispossession” (16-17).

If nothing is intrinsically sacred, it is argued, then everything *can* become sacred through human labour. As “the ‘pivoting’ of the sacred that occurs through the work of ritualization and interpretation allows virtually any place to become sacred”, then “sacred meaning and significance, holy awe and desire, can coalesce in any place that becomes, even if only temporarily, a site for intensive interpretation” (14). This acknowledgment informs a new agenda for social analysis, wherein sacred spaces are observed in their stretching inside and outside the boundaries of organised religions, in the intertwining of the economic and the spiritual, in pilgrimage sites, in the geopolitics of the religious, in politics of spatial segregation of religious minorities or in state-church relations (Eade and Sallnow 1991).

Two dichotomies are used for expressing the opposition between the substantial and relational approach, that of *poetics-politics* and *insider-outsider* (Kong 2001). Eliade focuses on the poetics of sacred space as felt and lived by insiders through the flowing of hierophanies. To investigate such an experience, the researcher must cast light on how such hierophanies, when manifest, matter to the perceiving person. For the postmodern scholarship, on the contrary, social sciences must observe how politics of the sacred determines its poetics, that is, how power and social conflict merge within formal performances of sacralisation of space. Sacred space is produced and activated through acts of adaptation, resistance and subversion. Sacred space is, then, something entirely material and sensible. The insider’s experience of the sacred matter insofar as it is factually expressed within the space of the outsider; the researcher must be a detached observer demanded to investigate the sacred in its own materiality. According to this approach, the scientificity of research is achieved by putting the poetics of religion, as well as the religious orientation of the researcher, in brackets: truth claims are irrelevant for the geographer as long as they do not materially affect the public, which is conceived as a space necessarily sanitised from any metaphysics. Despite many similarities, the relational approach diverges from geographical approach to religion as a social form in its specific focus on how the production of sacred space makes it capable of looking beyond organized religions.

But is the sacred a mere social construction manifest and directly observed as material? More than simply overlooking the insider’s experience, isn’t it another way of contesting the sacred and desecrating space? What is it seen in action seems still the attempt by social sciences of “policing the sublime” (Milbank 2006) – of reducing the esoteric to the exoteric, of marginalizing the *batin* of every *ṣāḥib* in the private, making it irrelevant to the scientific inquire and to the constitution of the real.

3.1 Reconsidering Eliade's sacred space

A number of critiques around the relational approach can be made due to the fact that it seems to be founded on a deep misinterpretation of the epistemic stance it aims to discard, that of Mircea Eliade's 'substantial' sacred. Such critiques help grounding a geographical theory capable of accounting for the religious as publicly relevant without dismissing its inward dimension for rather circumscribing it to the sphere of the immediately sensible.

First, relational approaches misconceive Eliade's opposition of sacred and profane by equating it to the dichotomy of religion and the secular, assumed as discrete, stable and universal categories. However, for Eliade such an opposition is situated on a level that is ontological and experiential rather than sociological and categorical. For him the sacred is not discretely separated from the profane as a distinct object; on the contrary, it emerges within the profane through the manifestation of a hierophany. A hierophany is not only, and not simply, the intuitive revelation of a more-than-worldly, extra-sensitive and transcendental dimension – a dimension monadically separated from the everyday world and inaccessible to the nonreligious person. It is, instead, also an historical and finite phenomenon shaped in its manifestation by space, culture, power issues, and so forth. More prominently, it is the act through which a spatial order is instituted upon the amorphous surface of what cannot otherwise be called 'world'. It is transcendental not because of its otherworldly remoteness, but because of its capacity to disclose human consciousness beyond the contingency of the profane, the historical, the social, or the material. Nevertheless, the sacred cannot be located anywhere but within those profane space-times, historical facts and situations, as well within the materiality of the environment:

“A sacred stone will manifest one modality of the sacred at one moment of history: this stone shows that the sacred is something other than the cosmic surroundings, and like stone, the sacred *is* absolutely, invulnerable, steadfast, beyond change. This expression of *being* (expressed on the religious plane) in the stone can change its 'form' over the course of history; the same stone may be venerated later on not for what it reveals *directly* (not, that is, as an elementary hierophany) but because it has become part of some sacred spot (temple, altar, or some such), or because it is held to be the manifestation of a god, or for some other reason. It remains something other than its surroundings; it is still sacred in virtue of the primordial hierophany by which it was *chosen*, but the value attributed to it changes according to the religious theory in which that hierophany happens to fit at a given time” (1958: 25).

The historical manifestation of hierophanies within the profane endows whoever is able to perceive them with the capability to attribute unity to multiplicity, order to disorder. In other words, the irruption of the sacred in the space of this world corresponds to the triggering of a cosmogony, the making of Cosmos (*kosmos*, 'order of the world') out of Chaos (*chaos*, 'void'). At this juncture, the emerging of the sacred

expresses and responds to “an unquenchable ontological thirst” (1987: 64). If the sacred space is a cosmogony and a cosmology, the impetus and manifestation of an inner order in being, then “it is the experience of the sacred that founds the world, and even the most elementary religion is, above all, ontology” (210). The sacred offers sense to being in the world by emerging from the profane and investing it with a transcendental order. Rather than dichotomical, Eliade’s sacred space is instead the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the paradoxical coexistence of the profane with the sacred *because of* the sacred.

Second, it is not true that Eliade’s conception of sacred space gives no attention to human labour. For the postmodern critique, to conceive religious phenomena as sub-products of the irruption of a transcendental sacred constrains research on the description of revealed religions assumed as ontological givens; the substantial perspective would, then, neglect the agency of social actors in the formation of sacred space and the religious. Nonetheless, Eliade argues that hierophanies are paralleled or even produced by deliberate acts of consecration that imitate and reproduce the work of those signs and manifestations felt as other-worldly. Such practices of consecrations activate every act of territorialisation: “establishing in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice – the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by ‘creating’ it” (1987: 34). As much as ‘officially sacred spaces’ such as places of worship and of veneration, for Eliade every space can be sacralised – cities, home, the body, and life itself, fragmented and recomposed in a multiplicity of space-times by the light of the sacred. Just as for postmodern scholars, even for Eliade everything can potentially be sacred. For Eliade too, in fact, “we must get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual and social life. Indeed, we cannot be sure that there is *anything*—object, movement, psychological function, being or even game—that has not at some time in human history been somewhere transformed into a hierophany” (1958: 11). What needs to be understood is thus *how* and *why* a specific cut of the profane become invested by a hierophanic luminosity, as all hierophanies are to be chosen and singled out by human acts. As argued by Allen (1978), Eliade’s conception of the sacred moves within a tension between the givenness of the structures of the world, revealed to us through hierophanies, and free acts of human creativity:

“Phenomenologically, the religious experience has an initial emphasis upon a kind of passivity and then a creativity emerging from the passivity. True creativity emerges when we can decipher the fundamental givenness that is revealed to us. It emerges from what the particular and historical does with the givenness: how it constitutes or actualizes these inexhaustible possibilities by embodying them in a specific historico-cultural context, by providing them with a particular content and particular values” (188).

A remarkable distinction between Eliade's approach and that of postmodern scholarship is that, while for the latter the sacred is essentially *social-cum-natural*, for the former any practice of sacralisation is instead essentially 'transhuman'. This capacity is expressed not only by the fact that the sacred can be manifest in any 'natural' phenomenon and non-human being, but also as it re-enacts a pre-secular cosmological unity between what is considered as 'human' and what 'nature'. Eliade's transhumanism is beneficial to the researcher for its capacity of going beyond the individual, the social and the natural, assuming the religious as a register operating for the unification of every fold of the real. It is the very concept of 'nature' itself, as Eliade acutely notes, that is the result of a process of desacralisation, of the fragmentation of the sacred Cosmos in specialised niches dedicated to different social functions and aims. Eliade's sacred space is essentially a force for cosmic integration. Even though occurring upon spatial elements, the manifestation of the sacred is not naturalistic, for it always enacts the intentionality of human cosmogonic practices.

Third, and finally, relational critics mistake Eliade's conception of space. Differently from what is claimed by postmodern scholars, Eliadian sacred space is not conceived as a monadic entity separated from the profane by clear-cut boundaries. On the contrary, thought in direct opposition to Cartesian space, it is the perpetual creative re-disposition of an infinite plurality of layerings and folds – a space, as Doreen Massey (2005) would later claim, of continuous multiplicities. For Eliade, space is a dimension shaped by the emergence of hierophanies; at the same time, it is the dimension through which a myriad hierophanies get manifest, overlapping and coexisting one with the other. All hierophanies are indeed the centre of the space they are constituting. Each of these centres is an ever-moving gateway to a plurality of other spaces, as all hierophanies “represent the whole universe in symbol ... every consecrated place, in fact, is a ‘centre’; every place where hierophanies and theophanies can occur, and where there exists the possibility of breaking through from the level of earth to the level of heaven” (Eliade 1958: 373). For this reason, “there can be a multiplicity of ‘centres’, because the nature of sacred space admits the coexistence of an infinity of places in a single centre” (385). Eliade's understanding of sacred space could hardly be restricted, as postmodern critics contend, to ontologically given monads produced by the doctrinal apparatus of organized religions, purely transcendental entities occasionally reified in this world through punctiform officially sacred places. Eliade's sacred space is instead a material-immaterial domain continuously unfolded through new hierophanies and new centres, in a complex dialectic between transcendence and immanence.

How do such conceptions of space and sacred space dialogue with Eliade's understanding of religion? For Eliade, as seen, religion is the experience of the sacred, for “religion exists where the sacred-profane dichotomy has been made” (Allen 1978: 130). The true essence of religion is constituted by the perpetual production of ontologies and Cosmic realities out of the irruption of hierophanies upon the profane, acts to be captured, interpreted and favoured by human agency in response to a universal desire

for meaning. Again, the opposition of sacred and profane is in Eliade essentially rhetorical, as “a profane existence is never found in the pure state. To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behaviour” (Eliade 1987: 23). Here is the main point: every man is *homo religiosus*. According to Eliade, human life itself is animated by the perpetually production of sacred space and the religious: “to posit *homo religiosus* is to assume an archetypal postulate, a purported state of being that bases all human actions and aspirations as religious in motivation, that is, as motivated by the desire for meaning, being, and truth” (Cave 1993: 93). The concept of *homo religiosus* allows us to conceive the truth claims of organised groups such as sects and neo-spiritual movements, but also collective structures of sense conventionally considered as nonreligious, such as political theologies and mythologies, as essentially religious. But also, crucially, it enables us to be attentive to forms of lived religiosity across those who define themselves as nonreligious:

“The nonreligious man of modern societies is still nourished and aided by the activity of his unconscious, yet without thereby attaining to a properly religious experience and vision of the world. The unconscious offers him solutions for the difficulties of his own life, and in this way plays the role of religion, for, before making an existence a creator of values, religion ensures its integrity. From one point of view it could almost be said that in the case of those moderns who proclaim that they are nonreligious, religion and mythology are ‘eclipsed’ in the darkness of their unconscious – which means too that in such men the possibility of reintegrating a religious vision of life lies at a great depth ... in other words, that nonreligious man has lost the capacity to live religion consciously, and hence to understand and assume it; but that, in his deepest being, he still retains a memory of it” (Eliade 1987: 212-213).

To affirm that each person is a *homo religiosus* does not mean that those who are nonreligious should satisfy their ontological thirst in theological doctrines. Eliade’s claim is, instead, essentially geographical: it states that there is not and cannot be any experience of space that is not essentially of religious nature, that is, beyond the space made real throughout the experience of hierophanies.

3.2 *Grounded theologies*

How can sacred space and religion be studied by the geographer? For sure, we can strongly contradict the claim according to which Eliade’s notion restricts geographical research to collecting what is ontologically given as sacred. On the contrary, his conception grounds an ever-moving plurality of cosmologies that, being fully or partially developed into theological discourses, are always inherently reflected in a plurality of spatial entities. Defined through such theoretical premises, the sacred is ostensive to *homo religiosus* on two different levels: first, it can be experienced through sense-perception, within the emergence of a hierophany manifest in human and nonhuman phenomena, symbolising the revelation of universal structures of Being; second, it can be refracted in mute and invisible cosmologies,

in the partition of the sensible produced through the religious experience. Are these levels lived uniquely as poetics of space? How do they relate with politics of the sacred? And finally, is there a way for geography of religion to account the ways in which the lived experience of hierophanies exceed the individual and the biographical for becoming social and public?

On an original reframing of Eliade's theory of *homo religiosus*, Justin Tse defines the task of geography of religion as the study of how space is perpetually invested by *grounded theologies*, defined as "performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent" (2014: 202). Following Milbank's account on the pre-eminence of theology and Taylor's nova effect, Tse stresses that both positive and negative takes on the sacred are theologically constituted, that every discourse that recognises or denies the agency of the transcendent and of the sacred in the everyday world is a truth claim actively articulating the tensions between transcendence and immanence. Rather than sociological categories, religion and the secular are assumed as embodied narratives bodily and discursively disclosed within the making of place. Religion, just like for Eliade, is the lived experience of the unseen within the seen, an experience capable of structuring our being-in-the-world in the articulation of sacred and profane. Specularly, the secular is understood as the performative enactment of those discourses, even implicit, that negates the agency of supernatural forces on a specific cut of the everyday, while implying that the religious is irrelevant to the making of those specific places. Still, even if negatively defined, the secular is for Tse a theological formulation of the real. Such a conceptualisation of the dichotomy religion-secular, more radically than Ivakhiv's, implies that "it is not necessary to define the religious in geography, as if there were anything that could be considered outside the bounds of religious inquiry" (Tse 2014: 202). The geographer is required to be fully aware that both have an active agency on the constitution of space; said differently, that "they inform immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries, including in geographies where theological analyses do not seem relevant" (202).

By acknowledging that religion and the secular are discursive and embodied narratives about the place of the transcendent in the immanent, one in strict relation with the other, the notion of grounded theologies can be variously beneficial to the geographer (Ley and Tse 2013). For example, it can address geographical research on lived religiosity and lived secularities, that is, on every truth claim along the wide spectrum of the nova effect of religious diversity. By arguing that place-making is *always* constituted by the negotiation of transcendence-immanence and of sacred-profane, that it is *always* informed by explicit or implicit theological narratives, it poses the religious, whatever it might mean to different individuals, in the intertwining of a myriad constitutive hierophanies. By adopting this approach, geographers "might inquire how those who claim to be 'religious' may be performing secular theologies in their spatial practices and how those who purport to have no 'religious' leanings make places informed by implicit

theological narratives” (Tse 2014: 214). Tse’s approach supports a further de-essentialization of religion by offering epistemic ground to research, for example, on “how individuals negotiate their own personal intersections among faith, sexuality, and society despite hierarchical attempts to construct hegemonic unities among diverse theological groups” (211). Based on an open definition that crosscuts and interrelates the conventionally ‘religious’ and the conventionally ‘secular’, the notion of grounded theologies can finally fulfil geography’s aim to inquire into the grey area in between the two.

The notion of grounded theologies is crucial for postsecular theories precisely because it supports tackling the assumption according to which religion is relevant to research only when it is immediately manifest as a social fact. If we want to address seriously lived religiosities and lived secularities, geography cannot be constrained in analysing the social form of religion, institutional religions, or religious communities – even if looked through their intersections within the ‘secular-religious continuum’. We rather have to come to terms with the grounded theologies of religious as well as nonreligious individuals, groups, and discourses, in the acts through which they spatialize the sacred by moving in and out confessional truth claims, knowledges, and cosmologies. Tse ultimately argues that “such research programs would have the ironic effect of showing that it is not religion that must be made relevant to secularity, but that secularities are but grounded theologies among many others in the continuous making of modern space” (216). Altogether, grounded theologies reveal the theological constitution of the social sciences, including human geography – how their discourses, rather than neutrally analytic or descriptive, forge their methods and praxis on a theological basis that ultimately impacts the object of study itself, the religion-secular articulation.

Last point: the notion of grounded theologies is able to fully develop Eliade’s conceptualization of space. Differently from those geographies that spatialize social and functional differentiation to the point of metaphorically paralleling the religious to an archipelago within an ocean of secularities (Wilford 2010; 2012; Howe 2009), it is able to show how religion and the secular might coexist within the same space, activated by a myriad of concomitant poetics and politics of the sacred. It does so because it conceives the tensions between the visible and the invisible, between the *batin* and the *zahir*, as the playground upon which truth claims are produced and enacted, be they characterised as conventionally religious or nonreligious. It is attentive to the inward experience of the religious because it opens to admit the possibility for an indiscernible transcendental towards which grounded theologies might tend. Altogether, it is attentive of the outward dimension, as the domain within which confessional and non-confessional takes on the real enter the everyday world of bodies. What grounded theologies promise to do is to ultimately assume that the spatiality of religion is forged by the relation these two dimensions build one with the other, for finally casting light on the relevance of interior religious experiences for public

geographies and the complexities through which the latter regulate the conditions under which the former can take place.

4. Religious landscapes, vision, and imagination

What grounded theologies does human geography move from? In what way do its discourses edge specific truth claims? This section tries to respond to these questions through a critical recognition around the development of the notion of cultural landscape and its application within geography of religion. Central in the disciplinary development of geographical knowledge, the notion of landscape refers to *both* the portion of a territory and its image, both the thing itself and its representation, as it is perceived and represented by an observer. The theoretical development of such a concept enlightens how geographical knowledge upheld different ways of understanding the making of space and place, of subjects, and finally of the religious itself. Through this angle, I try to evaluate how geographical knowledge mirrors specific theological takes on the real. In other words, I argue that the various approaches to cultural landscape represent specific performative narratives on transcendence and immanence. The survey is flanked by some notes on the relations between landscape and imagination, that is, on the significance of images, imagination and imaginaries in both the production of geographical studies and as objects of study per se. The reason for focusing on imagination is that, as I will extensively explain in the next chapter, imagination constitutes the specific register of the apophatic: the midpoint between sense-perception and intellection, imagination is the capacity for coordinating the *batin* and the *zahir* of the religious.

4.1 *Landscape as seen*

The first understanding of cultural landscape is that of a portion of territory as it is *seen* by a detached observer. Inaugurated by Vidal de La Blanche's regional geography and systematised by Carl Sauer's Berkeley's school (1963), landscape is essentially the product of the interactions between human agency and the natural environment – wherein, as succinctly stated, “culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result” (343). First, landscape is factual, a material conglomeration of distinct objects and forms. To study of landscape is then to describe its morphology, the adaptation of human settlements to given environmental characteristics but also, even more extensively, the transformations of the physical environment by human labour in order to inhabit a land. Second, to approach the cultural landscape is essentially an empirical effort: the emphasis is here posed on fieldwork, on exploration afoot the land and in direct observation. The role of the geographer is to dissect a pre-given landscape in order to classify its components as they are immediately manifest to an external observer. The subject observing the landscape, however mobile and emotionally attached to the environment, must be epistemically detached from it. Detachment, the search for a point of observation that guarantees epistemic authority to the observer, constitutes indeed the primary requirement for the professional geographer and for the scientificity of his take: in other words, the academic geographer

must suspend his affective engagement with the landscape, by assuming the supposedly neutral position of the outsider. For the landscape to be correctly read, two conditions are then required: on the one hand, the elements under investigation must be immediately visible and inert; on the other, the geographer must be eclectically educated, in order to be capable of operating a personal judgement in the selection of contents, of identifying and explaining the correlations between such elements and human needs.

This approach evolves from a clear-cut opposition between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’, wherein the real is the immanent, the immediately manifest, and the imaginary is what can be visualized by the endowed subject upon the contents provided by the real. Imagination operates as a romantic gaze on the real, “from applying intuition, part of the Romantic ideal, in the quest for Knowledge” (Gade 2011: 106; Norton 1989). It involves the ability of poetically synthesising the visual stimulus found in the landscape, in order to enhance the geographer’s aptitude of interpreting its morphology and to more vividly represent what he is able to grasp as the personality of the land.

The application of this approach to geography of religion is well exemplified by the work of Wilbur Zelinksy (2001). In his research religion matters because it plays a crucial role in the shaping of American built environment – studied through the cataloguing of religious buildings, their formal characteristics, their localization in urban and non-urban settlements, the ways they impact the streets in which they are set through parking lots, facilities and banners, and so forth. In other words, the spatiality of religion is grasped as the super-organic “accumulation of visual and mappable testimony” (582).

But, can we consider religion as the explicitly visible, as the essentially material? Can it be detached from the gaze through which we are able of observing it? A number of critiques can be made around this approach. The first is that it takes religion as an ontological given, neglecting to engage with the acts through which religion is transformed by its territorialisation. Second, its empiricism is scarcely reflective on how vision can never maintain its promises for objectivity, given that it is always negotiated through matters of positionality, on the one side the scientific education and preoccupations while on the other the truth claims that articulate what can be seen and what cannot. As summarised by Anne Buttimer, the morphological approach to religious landscape is “quite opaque, glossing over tensions between faith communities and politically exploited denominationalism, ignoring issues of reflexivity and the taken-for-granted values of the observer” (Buttimer 2006: 197). Through the concept of grounded theologies, I suggest that its opacity is further brought by how it reduces the religious to its *zahir*.

4.2 *Landscape as a way of seeing*

A second theorization of the concept of cultural landscape emerged during the 80s, moved by a radical contestation of Sauer’s realism and objectivism. Even though still visual, this approach problematizes aesthesis while contextually disputing the innocence and neutrality of geographical gaze. Led by a social

constructivist perspective and influenced by the semiotic turn in social sciences and humanities, it considers the landscape as a *way of seeing* the cultural and political matters that produce the territory and our experience of it. Cosgrove and Daniels (1988), for example, detect the agency of a regime of power relations obscured and naturalised by representational technique across pictorial landscapes. Others have extended these findings by studying everyday landscapes as the material product of specific constructions of power sublimated by a visual ordering superimposed on societies (Duncan 1990; Mitchell 2003; Rose 1993). The role of the geographer moves from the morphological description of a pre-given material reality to that of critically interpreting the very acts through which we visually perceive this reality. Through this, “landscape therefore becomes for new cultural geographers the visual medium through which they can provide critical interpretations of social and cultural formations” (Wylie 2007: 92). By deconstructing the symbolic and representational strategies through which landscape reifies authority, control and ownership, this perspective allows the geographer to unveil its deceptive function and its effectiveness. Landscape, differently put, orientates and indeed manipulates our vision, by naturalizing the socially constructed; geographers are called to demystify the material and discursive mechanisms that ground, camouflage and reproduce underlying power structures through the structuring of a specific visual order. Even though contesting the epistemic neutrality of vision, this approach still privileges the visual as the modality through which accessing the landscape – research still requires an explicitly manifest object of observation, it still requires a detached observer, it still requires an objectifying act of observation, and it still requires the exercise of synthetic knowledge. In conclusion, we cannot read the landscape as a way of seeing if not by the means of pure intellection: what the senses are able to receive needs to be filtered by critical reason.

This perspective resembles the notion of ‘geographical imaginaries’ (Gregory 1994; Stephens 2011; Cosgrove 2008). Drawn from Edward Said’s paramount study on imaginative geography in orientalism (1979), the notion of geographical imaginaries refers to those bodies of images, both material and immaterial, that constitute and address our gaze on the real. Imaginaries are socially constructed devices that orientates the regime of the visible and the processes of signification through which we see (della Dora 2006). If the visual is socially constructed, a text to be interpreted and a veil to be removed, the question is: “if landscapes on the ground are not merely a projection of our views but a medium shaping the way we look at the world, how do they materialise the geographical imagination, in their very fabric and the way we live in, work on and move through them?” (Daniels 2011: 185). For the geographer, it becomes then “necessary to find ways to interrogate the unconscious and to explore the multiple spatialities inscribed within the geographical imaginary” (Gregory 1995: 475).

When approaching the religious, this perspective has the specific aim to unveil the complex relationships that sacred spaces symbolically intertwine with power structures. Petri Raivo (1997; 2002), for example,

observes the tensions evoked by Orthodox churches within Finnish post-war landscapes. Such tensions are observed in the textual symbols manifest in the materiality of the built environment, whose picturesque qualities are revealed as instrumental to heritage tourism and to the political needs of underpinning an otherwise blurring regional identity; what this study elaborates is that for these functions being pursued “the key word is visibility, both materially and ideologically” (2002: 336). Lily Kong (1993) argues that religious landscapes can become object of political conflictuality whereas the conception of sacred is publicly negotiated by minority groups for resisting secularist coercion. Such negotiation, however discursive, is shown to be performed through material and symbolic strategies.

By analysing the practices of writing of hagiographies in Medieval Cornwall as maps embodying social memory, David Harvey (2002) argues that such narratives “undoubtedly included the coded messages of certain dominant groups in society, rendering certain values as common sense, and legitimating a particular social hierarchy” (244). Hagiographies are, then, considered as geographical by nature, as they are productive of places and landscapes. They do this by shaping, in other words, a number of geographical imaginaries: “through instilling local identity and memory with reference to an imagined landscape of religious order, often through the use of environmental metaphors, these saintly legends literally showed people how to experience the familiar landscape that they inhabited” (245).

Naylor and Gale (2002) retrace the public reception of Fazl Mosque, London’s first mosque. Publicly praised as exotic during the 20s, at the time of its erection, during the 90s the application for its extension has been instead invested by significant animosity caused by its ethno-religious character, now depicted as alien to the built environment. This work effectively illustrates how visibility, rather than be purely factual, can be renegotiated across different time spans, how the same mosque “has meant different things to different ethnic and social groups in different times and places, and how the mosque’s relative ability to conform to associative aesthetic valuations effectively sanctioned as well as condemned building works” (41).

What these works demonstrate is that our gaze, rather than innocent or objective, is socially constructed by geographical imaginaries; altogether, they say that the religious landscape is constituted through the agency of those imaginaries. If transcendence is out there, completely unreachable and unfelt and a discourse mediated by power structures, immanence must also be doubted as a socio-historical construction: the percepts we are able to collect in the encounters with the physical world require to be validated by the critical intervention of detached reason.

4.3 Non-representational landscapes: the immanently spiritual

The approach sketched by postmodern cultural geographers is criticised by an emerging scholarship for its scarce attention to the lived experience of the insider, that is, to the ways we sensuously relate and live

the landscape we inhabit. Drawing on Heidegger's being-in-the-world and Merleau-Ponty's holism, Spinoza's materialism and Deleuze's ontogenetic dynamism, this new perspective is defined as non-representational (Thrift 2007; Lorimer 2005; 2008). Non-representational theories (NRT) suggest that landscape is not the environment as it is seen, not a way of seeing, but rather "the materialities and sensibilities with which we see" (Wylie 2007: 152; 2009). First point, NRT objects to the ocular-centrism of geographical studies. Approaches centred on the visual are rejected as epistemically naïve, for they mirror a subtle form of universalising Cartesian dualism according to which vision would be an instrumental disposition to an objective, disentangled knowledge. The requirement of epistemic detachment is equally scorned. NRT argues instead for an embodied and kinaesthetic perception *with*, rather than *of*, the landscape, outmanoeuvring the separation between the perceiver and the percept, mind and body, thought and the senses, culture and nature (Macpherson 2010). While rejecting the positivistic fantasy of an objective study of the landscape, NRT discloses a number of new methodological strategies for accessing and presenting the world. Vision is substituted by other sensuous dispositions, such as aurality, touch, smell, taste, movement (Sui 2000; Peterson 2009; Middleton 2010; Pinder 2001; Tan 2013; Sliwa and Riach 2011; Degen and Rose 2012).

Second, NRT disputes the idea of landscape as a pre-given and inert realm, arguing instead for "animating landscapes" (Rose and Wylie 2006). Rather than factual and fixed, landscapes are intended as proper lifeworlds, more-than-human assemblages of materialities within which the subjectivities are perpetually encapsulated (Anderson and Wylie 2009; Latham and McCormack 2004; Wright 2014). In other words, landscape is reframed as a field of becoming enacted through a plurality of human and non-human beings. Rather than to representation per se, NRT opposes to "representationalism, and discursive idealism", for rather conceiving the acts of representing the landscape "as performative in themselves; as doings" (Dewsbury et al. 2002: 438). For this, NRT argues for performativity over contemplation, for the perpetual disclosing of bare life over socially constructed acts of vision, for virtuality and the haunting of invisibilities rather than on the reification of presences (Dewsbury 2003; Rose 2006).

Third, NRT are attentive to the affectual as registered at the level of the visceral. For "the importance of taking seriously the fact that the 'sense' of common-sense practices always emerges as much from visceral, affective and pre-discursive processes as it does from the materializing force of discursively embedded representations" (McCormack 2003: 490). Affects are understood here as relational but impersonal, more-than-subjective forces that transcend the particular for connecting and altogether constituting the corporeal within a multiplicity of beings (Pile 2009; McCormack 2003; Anderson 2006; 2011; Bondi 2005). This approach seems to finally disturb any epistemic distance between the gaze of the academic and that of the non-academic, eroding the authority of the vantage point of view on the real conventionally attributed to the geographer. The scope of the geographer becomes then that of

presenting life in its eventfulness, to pose himself within a continuous eruption of bodies affecting and being affected by the lifeworlds they live with. Geographers do not have any privileged access to the noumenon of the landscape; like everyone else they are “cast in its materiality, in a world of transsubjective modalities of experience, an in-between world of imperatives instigating our activities” (Dewsbury et al. 2002: 439).

But how do NRT approaches to the landscape conceive imagination? Although largely evoked, imagination is under-theorised and used in metaphoric or implicit ways. Sometimes, it polemically refers to ‘geographical imaginary’, performative representational signs that address perception – with the difference that here NRT give emphasis to the eventful possibilities of reverting the socially constructed codes of a given imaginary (see Harris 2014). An example is provided by McCormack’s work on dance (2008), wherein

“... cultural meaning and imagined geographies are never stable. While tangoing bodies can be linked closely with the imagined geographies of Argentine identity, they also signify the processes of displacement and longing of which this identity is partially composed. But it is not just the meaning of tangoing bodies that changes. The very techniques, rhythms and movements of which the dance consists – what we might call its micro- geographies – are always being composed and recomposed, even if only minutely, each time bodies do tango. This fact has important implications for how we understand the politics of tango, and the kinds of political spaces in which tangoing bodies move. Certainly, these political spaces are not just symbolic or discursive. They also reveal a kind of corporeal micro-politics, insofar as they involve a process of subtle negotiation of relations between bodies” (1826).

Others, such as Anderson and Wylie (2009), speak about imagination as the individual capability of intuitively access to the virtual through the material, through turbulences of affects, percepts and sensuous enactments. Imagination and the imaginary are then conceived as openings to the unseen, the unfolding of radical possibilities of creatively making the invisible present. Despite these premises, NRT does not articulate the notion of imagination neither fully nor coherently, whereas it may relate to practices of writing (Thrift 2007), to analogic strategies for reflecting about spatial formations (Pile 2008), or more commonly to the acts of creatively producing the *unreal* in the real space of the body (Paterson 2009; Latham and McCormack 2004; Jones 2011; Wylie 2009).

Considering NRT’s emphasis on the ephemeral and its epistemic receptivity to non-material energies and the invisible, its influence on geographical studies on religion is not surprising. New approaches focus on performances of enchanting the space of immanence, on the articulation of visibilities and invisibilities

through synaesthesia and affective registers. The notion of religious landscape is significantly transformed: in few words, we can say that it is not anymore something visual, but something felt.

Differently from religious landscape *as seen*, NRT dissociates the sacred from the purely objective for claiming that the invisible has an agency in the making of the everyday by operating in the formation of subjectivities. Differently from religious landscapes *as a way of seeing*, rather than disenchanting the religious by unveiling its intersections with the mundane NRT focuses on lived performances of worlding as they are bodily constituted with a plurality of materialities and immaterialities that exceed the socially constructed. NRT's approach postulates that the religious continuously arises from, through and with an ever moving landscape being and becoming with those who inhabit it. On a first level, a number of ethnographic works use such lenses for accessing the role of religion in embodied practices of place-making (Olson 2013), in emotional engagements with memory (Sharma 2012), in performances of storytelling (Finlayson 2012; Finlayson and Mesev 2014), in embodied practices of veiling and gendering (Gokarisksel 2009; 2012), in synesthetic struggles for the recognition of difference (De Witte 2008).

A radical reframing of the whole field of geography of religion is proposed by Holloway (2003; 2006; 2013) through a specific focus on bodily re-enchantment of the everyday profane across organised religions and unstructured spirituality. More than contesting the dualism of religion and the secular, his writings explore how embodied spirituality favours “a making of the sacred *with* the profane such that the distinction only emerges from the very practice of its making ... the sacred irrupting in the everyday such that it becomes a sacralisation *of* the everyday” (1968-1970). Specific attention is given to the kinaesthetic embodiment of rituals as doctrinal dispositions mediated by affectual registers. The sacrality of sacralised space-times is fully relational: the believer engages with more-than-human assemblages to the point that there is “not an embodied subject acting upon an inert world, but an embodied subject whose agency is constituted through a productive outsideness” (1968). Enchanted space-times, for Holloway, are not “a real material thing” (2006: 185); they are *felt* as such by the believer through continuous practices of differentiation of the sacred and the profane, practices that transform the profane in something ‘qualitative more’. The experience of the sacred is embodied and emerges when any sensory stimulus other than the spiritual vanishes: “if the music stands for all the social and cultural ills that have befallen our bodies and knowledge, then to stop the music is to rid oneself of these conditions and enter an everyday life where the sacred is in everything we do and experience ... The stop has a cosmic significance because it allows the sacred to become apparent” (2003: 1971).

The work of Dewsbury and Cloke (2009) reflects on the articulation of visible and invisible as the ultimate dilemma of any phenomenological take and more generally of our experience of being-in-the-world. The authors introduce a new notion, that of ‘spiritual landscapes’, defined as “co-constituting sets of relations between bodily existence, felt practice and faith in things that are immanent, but not yet manifest” (696).

The spiritual is here the immateriality with which we see the landscape, that it is in turn an entirely material and sensed field of bodies and forces. Posed beyond direct perception but still being felt at the bodily level, the spiritual is for Dewsbury and Cloke “something constitutive of everyday life; cutting at that space between absence and presence, and manifesting itself at the immediate, and therefore non-metaphysical, level of the body” (697). In virtue of its capacity of presenting to us the unknown, to make us struggle with the naivety of the visual and of discursive rationality, in the end spiritual landscapes are essentially the experience of the ‘doubt’, for the relation between the spiritual and the landscape “is the tension between what is solid, present, corporeal and material and that which inheres in the material as something mysterious, elusive, and ethereal” (698). Drawing on Marion’s saturated phenomenon and Deleuze’s fold, Dewsbury and Cloke suggest that experiencing the world exceeds the sensible and intentionality. The central question is how we can make phenomenological sense of what cannot be manifest and object of immediate perception, of the unseen. The authors reply to this question by pointing out that, as we cannot deny that some experience the unseen, we must simply acknowledge that the spiritual is performed as real. The focus of spiritual landscapes is then embodiment, affects and sensuous dispositions. Such a geography is ultimately played on how we intuitively participate to forces beyond the organic we cannot experience but feel:

“The world, and the matter that makes it up, exists on two levels, a material and corporeal one and an immaterial and incorporeal one; both equally real ... As well then as the physiological, the bodily disposition to being in the world, there is the physical world in which such bodily dispositions are folded. Spiritual landscapes attest to the fact that the world is alive in both these senses. As such our embodied subject position as physiological, the world that we can directly perceive as an organism organizing the sense data, is a diversion of life in its fuller sense” (707).

What this work suggests is that, rather than hindering the spiritual to be felt, immateriality is the very condition for its own givenness at the level of the body. Said differently, the world is a mystery to be lived rather than to be consciously understood: as such, “the spiritual gets performed into being in contrast to the privileged domain of the known world”, as “what matters is the undecidability that demands, and sets us on the way towards, the seeking of answers. What matters is that the demand is given” (704). Again, the body and the material are the level in which the unseen is proven as real; the visceral is the only register in which the religious is performed.

Interestingly, these authors underscore the importance for studies on the landscape of focusing on spirituality rather than on “religion”. For Holloway, the spiritual lies beyond theistic faith and for this reason constitutes a conceptual field more receptive to transformative practices of sacralisation of the everyday. For Dewsbury and Cloke, spirituality exceeds the boundaries of religion because, on the one hand, it can be experienced even by nonreligious individuals, and, on the other hand, because religion is

often active in mundane activities and the exercise of power, “associated with practices and outcomes that appear as false spiritualizations of manifestly unspiritual and disengaging phenomena” (696). Their account is, however, significantly marked by Christian theology and by a Christian vocabulary, revindicating not only that there could be a phenomenology of Christianity but that Christianity itself is nothing but phenomenology, in the sense that “it is Christianity that enables something to appear” (704).

I would like to conclude this chapter with some critical remarks about the contribution of NRT to the field. First, their emphasis on the role of embodiment, on affect and on sensual dispositions as the only realm in which the agency of the unseen can be testified and proven reflects a grounded theology that cogently rejects transcendence in favour of a strictly monist ontology. This theological take is what in the previous chapter has been defined with Bentston as Deleuzian postsecularism, a form of Spinozian materialism according to which the unseen is already encapsulated within the seen in a perpetual dynamic of bodily affections and concatenations. Even though extremely familiar to a significant portion of intellectual elites and academics, vitalism is only one of the many ways through which the tension between transcendence and immanence can be articulated. Whilst one can subscribe or not to NRT’s philosophical preferences and hopes for the emancipatory significance of a non-dogmatic enchanted materialism, it cannot go unnoticed that the levelling of transcendence on the plane of immanence is theologically condemned by many organised religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism on all – and by a remarkable number of believers. To state that the spiritual, which is the name that NRT give to what is here defined as religion, is “explicitly earthly, grounded on fleshy disposition” (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009: 706) and that the immaterial is nothing but the non-manifest material we cannot sense but feel is, rather than to open the field to an unknown mystery, to prescribe another dogmatic solution to ultimate questions – a solution that is as equally unfounded as the conventionally religious ones it pretends to undermine and substitute. It is a solution, I suspect, that can be easily accepted by Western nonreligious individuals, especially in reason of its implications on the level of ethics and politics, but poses many epistemic difficulties to the many who subscribe to forms of religiosity in which transcendence is essential. To claim that immanence is the only domain in which the unseen can be ever experienced is to use ontological violence towards those who explain their religiosity in the everyday through other metaphysics.

Second, NRT suggests that to frame religion as a form of individual embodied experience would have the emancipatory effect of discarding both secularist requirements for an exclusive disenchanted rationality and religious groups’ presumptions around the finality and universality of their truth claims. To focus on the esoteric, NRT claims, has the positive effect of weakening the exoteric: in other words, to emphasise the role of the experiential actively challenges the agency of organized religions on the socio-political, a level that as it has been said they assume as utterly desacralizing. Again, one can agree or not with NRT’s theological program, but it cannot be denied that religion is one of the main sources

according to which people define their own identity, their value system, their morality, their political attitudes, their lifestyle, and so forth. Although not exclusively, religion is an inherently social and political phenomenon – to argue for religion to be deprived of this dimension would be once again to endorse a quintessentially secularist agenda, in which the fragmentation of a unified whole in distinct spheres and categories is cataphatically reproduced and legitimised as unescapable.

Two minor points are here implied. The first is that to reduce religion to individual experience would ultimately mean to neglect how religion is an inherently collective phenomenon: not only because its rituals are performed alongside other affiliates, but because it is often a truth claim capable of producing its own anthropology and its own soteriology – for defining what humankind is, who are the elected people and what is their final destiny. The second is that to maintain that religion is the unsayable is to mistake that it is instead *an attempt to say something about the unsayable*; this something that is always in the process of being said can assume the form of a discourse, a narrative, a doctrine, a parable, a recital, a symbology, and often it is all these things together. Religious people have a voice in the world, and this voice is nowadays even louder than in the past: to refuse to listen to what religion says, and instead focus on how the performance of saying is sensuously and affectively felt would not make our understanding of religion any stronger. On the contrary, I suggest that geography needs to be engaged with what religion is able to say precisely because our task as postsecular geographers is to be able to account for the specificity of its many voices as well as their spatial demands. The essence of every truth claim is tied on the articulation of the seen and the unseen, the *batin* and the *ẓahir*, the said and the unsayable: it is then of paramount importance to define our scholarly task on a contextual study of both discourse and the experiential as well as of both intellection and sensuous perception.

III

Sense-perception, imagination, and the religious

1. Introduction

This chapter reflects on the conditions through which the disclosing of hierophanies can be experienced within the physical world, and aims to amend human geography with a theoretical orientation capable of better dealing with the religious. In particular, I try to cast light on the possibilities for geographical knowledge to investigate the nexus between materiality and immateriality, and between sense-perception and intellection, in order to appreciate how these entail the *locus* for the religious to be produced, lived, and thought. Ultimately, I propose a revisited approach to geography of religion attentive to the complex ways in which grounded theologies are perpetually constituted in pre-discursive registers within the everyday sacred-profane. Such an approach finds its theoretical impetus on the notion of imagination, as it has been drawn by Peripatetic circles and early Islamic philosophy. My argument is that such a focus would effectively support geographical research in accounting the paradoxical spatiality of religion. I maintain that, by enacting imagination as the basis for investigating the religious, human geography can be better equipped for rethinking pluralism and the postsecular in accordance to apophatic principles.

In fact, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, religious phenomena pose a critical problem around the epistemic categories and methods deployed by geographers and more generally social scientists for understanding, analysing and describing our relations with the landscape, the environment, and with life itself. This problem is represented by the fact that the religious is two-faceted, fashioned by both an external expression (*ẓāhir*), intuitively spatial in reason of being immediately manifest as physical and socio-historical, and an inwards dimension (*bāṭin*), exceeding the material realm and assumed to reside beyond the domain of the sensible. Their intertwining, ontologically essential, corresponds to a major problem for the social sciences investigating the unfolding of the religious as a worlding practice:

“We observe the paradoxical coexistence revealed by the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. What is paradoxical is that an ordinary, finite, historical thing, while remaining a natural thing, can at the same time manifest something which is not finite, not historical, not natural. What is paradoxical is that something transcendent, wholly other, infinite, transhistorical, limits itself by manifesting itself in some relative, finite, historical thing” (Allen 1978: 127).

For the religious person these two dimensions, rather than separated, are strictly interrelated one another in a cohesive, even though silent and often unconscious, cosmogonic unity – that is, a unity that produces

a world to dwell and its inner order. Manifested within the material realm by extra-sensible hierophanies expounding the dialectic of sacred-profane, the consecrated world becomes inhabited by physical spaces that variously reiterate its inward organisation throughout an outward form. These spaces offer to the religious person perceptible expression of the invisible structures of the world and of our being in the world, an *axis mundi* and an *imago mundi*; however, they do not exhaust the religious as something utterly material. Elicited by sense-objects, the inward place the sacred as the centre of the mundane experience at large; by doing so, it becomes an active force orientating the structuring of the world, the creation of order out of chaos. Nonetheless, it is the more-than-sensible dimension that grounds the sensible as real, disclosing it as an active force in the search for ultimate meanings and giving it the ontological status of the religious. For the religious person, then, the realm of the material constitutes the level where the purely intelligible finds direct manifestation – testifying the subsistence of *something* that cannot be immediately experienced as manifest but is nevertheless felt as *real* through an act of contemplation of the sensible capable of transcending the sensible itself. At the same time, it must be maintained that the otherworldly cannot find any other expression than within the order of the sensible, within the repertoire of percepts encountered by the religious person in the world of bodies.

It is exactly here that lies the paradox of the religious. On the one hand, it cannot be fully comprehended if we limit our gaze at its exteriority, at its *zahir* – if conceived as an objectified, discrete and material reality that can be empirically grasped by a detached observer. On the other side, it is equally inadequate to consider the religious solely as the esoteric, as its *batin*, by discounting the physicality of the world as an inert scenario for invisible forces to be clutched uniquely by disembodied faith and knowledge. Both an empiricist approach and a disengaged one need to be dismissed as reductionist, for religion is essentially the intermingling of the two domains. Furthermore, either approaches would hardly provide suitable grounds for accommodating diversity, for they would overlook how different religions differently produce their cosmologies in the continuum between the sensuous and the purely intelligible.

As seen in the previous chapter, most of geographies of religion study the spaces where religion is directly manifested in its physicality – either the receptacles in which hierophanies are revealed or the forms through which religious groups territorialise. The experiential dimension seems to be generally neglected in reason of its impenetrability: to a great extent it seems not to be pertinent at all to the field of geography. It is however considered as relevant in two ways. First, when formalised as a cohesive apparatus undertaking the form of a doctrine, of a public theology, of a ‘church’, or of any social group assumed as sociologically salient (Kong 2001). Second, when it is a *presence* sensuously testified at the level of the body, taken by some researchers as the only space in which religion is *authentically* lived (Holloway 2003; Dewsbury and Cloke 2009; Finlayson 2012). Both approaches present some remarkable limitations. In fact, both tend to reconduct the inward dimension to the outward – in the first case, by considering it

as a motivation for its emergence as a social form; in the second, by considering the inward only when testified by its exteriorization at the level of the senses. Across the field the religious is generally unfolded as a discrete category that, however continuous to the inherently profane, is epistemically distinct and *other* to it (Wilford 2009; della Dora 2016). As said in the previous chapter, the canonical position of social sciences is that religion represents an exception, however sociologically relevant, within an entirely secular horizon that entirely comprises the natural order of the real. More than epistemically fragile, this assumption brings problematic political imports, for it naturalizes the subalternity of religious thought to secularity – fading the legitimacy of religious truth claims in favour of the nonreligious and marginalizing certain religious groups in favour of those conceived as more *reasonable*. To move beyond either purely materialist or spiritualistic approaches may allow the researcher to better catch the variety of understandings on the dialectics of transcendence and immanence, and to ultimately refuse any universalistic assumption about what religion is and *should be*.

What is needed is, then, a gnoseological model capable of catching the interweaving of the inward and outward dimensions, of the esoteric and the exoteric, of the perceptible and the imperceptible, of the material and the immaterial, of transcendence and immanence, as the tensions through which the religious is produced, lived, and thought. What is needed, otherwise said, is a geographical theory that understands the religious as the irreducible expression of *ẓāhir* and *bātin*, whereas one dimension is perpetually reflected within the other.

My point is that there is a device that has been conceptualised exactly for this scope, before being desacralized and drained by materialistic thought: this device is imagination. Rather than as *fantasy* and the register of the unreal, in this context imagination is instead conceived as an intermediary faculty with a noetic function. Set between sense-perception and intellectual conceptualization, it is thought as a way of filling the hiatus between the extra-sensible realm and the materiality through which hierophanies are manifest. On the one hand, it is assumed as the faculty through which the *homo religiosus* is ultimately capable of accessing to the sacred and sacred geographies, that is, to the structures according to which our being in the world becomes a cosmos, collectively and individually produced in concert with the sensible and the extra-sensible. On the other hand, imagination is the domain through which the living world reveals itself and disposes itself to participation. Imagination, said differently, has the capacity of being an intermediary between the human and the more-than-human, the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, the sayable and the unsayable, the known and the yet to be known.

Such an epistemic angle would allow geography to effectively approach the paradoxical relation that the religious enacts with space and the material. This relation would be thought as creative and constitutive, the locus in which the immaterial becomes corporeal and the material is spiritualized. Through such an approach, thus, it is possible to argue that the religious, even though not directly manifest in the sensible,

is anyway fully *ostensible* to the religious person in virtue of imagination. It is, said differently, within the tensions between the sensible and the extra-sensible creatively disclosed by imagination that our being in the world is sensed and lived (Sallis 2000). To argue that the religious is inherently imaginative and that imagination is the creative faculty that grounds the religious does not mean that religion is ‘unreal’, as conventional understandings of imagination would suggest (Bottici 2014; Casey 2000). On the contrary, I contend for a theory of imagination that does not postulate any assumptions about the real. For our gaze on the religious to be inclusive and respectful of difference, we need to think imagination beyond the understanding of image as mimetic and of the imaginary as fictitious. To think the religious through imagination can be beneficial for strengthening pluralism and postsecular geography. I here suggest two reasons for this.

First, it is so because the disclosing of imagination constitutes the basis according to which the religious is experienced *before* being settled as such. This level is particularly important for both human geography and postsecular theory because it is the locus where pre-political understandings are stretched *before* being grasped by discursive reason. Imagination is in fact the locus in which grounded theologies are immediately experienced and felt without being implicitly or explicitly connoted through conventionally religious or secular registers; it is only after the imaginative that they find their partial, and sometimes betraying, rendering in the discursive. If we want to offer impetus to an effective political theory for a humble and inclusive pluralism, we must be able of accounting religious difference and disagreement at its very roots – in the sphere of the unseen and the unsayable folded in the phenomenal. To give emphasis to imagination does not mean to dismiss the active role that processes of socialization and theological traditions have in the formation of the religious. On the contrary, it means to be concerned with the fact that metaphysics matters, and so does the phenomenal. To cast light on imagination ultimately means to credit creativity, of the subject and of a living world that is still yet to be manifest, for having an active role in the making of cosmologies, of subjectivities, and ultimately of political attitudes.

Second, postsecular geography would benefit from a focus on imagination because it designates a capacity of encountering the world that is common to all religions precisely because it exceeds them. Said differently, the production of cosmologies by the means of imagination comprises the way through which we *all* encounter the world, even when we do not have any affiliation to religious groups or when we define ourselves as nonreligious. As it has been stressed through Eliade’s concept of *homo religiosus*, it is epistemically problematic to operate a strict distinction between the religious and the nonreligious person, for both make sense of the world throughout processes of consecration of the everyday. Imagination constitutes the modality through which such processes are experienced. A gnoseological approach that allows geographical knowledge to catch religion beyond the exoteric would be of decisive importance for

postsecular geographies because it can inspire models of interreligious decision-making procedures beyond a clear-cut separation of religious and secular reason.

The chapter is organised in three sections. The first will discuss the significance of imagination within Aristotle's theory of mind. Outlined as an intermediate capacity that link the soul's faculties of sense-perception and intellection, imagination is granted by the Stagiran philosopher of a decisive role for the maintaining of living functions across ensouled beings. Such a theory constitutes a milestone within the whole history of philosophy, and has been variously re-interpreted by both Christian and Islamic philosophers. To review Aristotle's theory is of decisive importance because it is within this system that the terms through which philosophy approach the notion are set. Many insights introduced here will be in fact reinterpreted by different thinkers – for example, the relations between imagination and sense-perception, the use of the metaphor of light for critically approaching visibility, the deceptive capacity of imagination, the role of images in both deliberation and theoretical reason.

A major object of disagreement, as it will be extensively discussed within the second section, has been represented by Aristotle's dual theory of intellect. In fact, Aristotle distinguishes between two different kinds of intellect: one is *nous pathetikos*, generally translated as 'material intellect', intended as the perishable faculty of acquiring knowledge; the other is *nous poietikos*, rendered as 'active intellect', which is rather defined as an external, immortal and unaffected realm from which all things proceed. As it will be further illustrated, commentators have been divided between those who proposed a rationalistic reading, according to which *nous poietikos* is a fully human capability one can freely dispose of, and those who argued for an esoteric reading, according to which such an intellect would instead enact an intermediation between human's cognitive processes and something utterly external to it, that is, the divine. Within this section, I briefly focus on how *nous poietikos* has been read by Greek Peripatetics, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, as well as by three Muslim Peripatetics, such as al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn 'Sina), and Averroes (Ibn 'Rushd). The shifting interpretations of the role of *nous poietikos* in post-Aristotelian philosophy will be paralleled by those occurred to the notion of imagination. Specifically, the focus will be posed upon the relation intercurring between the imaginative capacity and the disclosing of theophanies within both human mind and the world of bodies.

The third and final section will summarise the contribution of two post-Avicennan philosophers and mystics such as Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi. Here, on the lines of Henry Corbin's decisive hermeneutic work and philosophical proposition, I will demonstrate that the faculty of imagination might constitute a decisive tool for rethinking our epistemic models on how to approach sensing the religious. In the chapter's conclusions I will maintain that such a visionary approach to imagination would ultimately serve human geography to make sense of the nexus between the *batin* and the *ẓahir* of the religious. At the

same time, I will argue that the notion of imagination can sustain the project of a postsecular city in reason of its sensitivity to religious pluralism gained through apophatic theology.

2. Aristotle's imagination

By providing the first all-encompassing theory of mind in the history of philosophy, Aristotle offers a crucial account around the role of imagination in cognitive processes and in affective encounters with the living world. His thesis on imagination is settled for the first time in the notorious *De anima* (DA), while later expanded in the short treatises *De memoria et reminiscencia* (DM), *De insomniis* (DI) and *De divinatione per somnum* (DD) – usually collected as a unitary work under the title of *Parva naturalia*. Aristotle's purposes are to seek for a comprehensive framework around the physiological faculties that portray life in living beings – nourishment, growth and locomotion, perception, and intellection. These writings, as I further illustrate, stress that imagination represents that capacity which ultimately merges, by both anticipating and addressing, the faculties of perception and intellection. While activating nutrition and movement, for Aristotle imagination is altogether decisive for practical and theoretical thinking, *nous*.

For my argument, Aristotle's pioneering take of imagination is made even more crucial by the longstanding influence it has had on a wide range of theological formulations – having been extensively assimilated by Neo-Platonist philosophers and migrated to Christianity and Islamic thought, from Avicenna to Thomas Aquinas, and so forth. At the same time, it has fed secular conceptions of knowledge, from Descartes' to Brentano's (Brentano 1978; Sorabji 2003; Caston 1998), from phenomenology to human geographies' epistemic models (Ash and Simpson 2014).

2.1 Aristotle's theory of the soul

Aristotle's definition of the soul is that of “the first principle of living things” (402a). The soul is the form of the living body, the substance that ensures *entelecheia* to matter, conferring unity to the actuality of life to be actualised by the soul through the deployment of living faculties. His theory maintains a structuring parallelism between the body and the soul, between the potentiality of matter and the actuality of its form as it is guaranteed by the soul: “matter is potentiality, form is actuality, and what is composed by the both of these is ensouled” (Polansky 2007: 185). Aristotle rejects pre-Socratic materialistic explanations of the soul; at the same time, he contrasts *Phaedo*'s conception for an insufflated soul imprisoned within the body and limited in the exercise of its functions by the body itself. On the contrary, the soul is the causal principle of life as it is expressed by and through bodies; bodies are animated by the soul, and only ensouled bodies are living bodies. The soul is the form that unifies the body and its faculties.

The soul is also thought as “a kind of actuality and account (*logos*) of that which has the potentiality to be of the appropriate kind” (414a). Here, Aristotle holds that it is in rational thinking that the ensouled body might find the highest actuality. As stressed by Diamond (2015: 57), “if the soul is the form and *entelecheia*

of all potency, then the governing sense of soul and its true nature lie no longer in nutrition, but in soul's most complete and developed manifestation, that is, thinking". Aristotle's *logos*, however, cannot be equated to disembodied rationality or dematerialised cognition. Its triggering has to be caught at the unfolding of the affection of desire prompted by sense-perception and imagination, in the hylomorphic coincidence of *eidos* and *morphe*. To think, Aristotle argues, begins with imagining the forms extracted from the sensible world and by disposing such images to *nous* (Wedin 1988). To think, then, requires the mediation of the body.

Defined as "that in virtue of which we say that an image occurs to us" (428a), imagination (*phantasia*) is for Aristotle the activity through which percepts acquired through sense-perception (*aisthesis*) are disposed to be apprehended by one's soul. Even though it follows sense-perception and cannot occur independently from it, imagination grounds the conditions for this to be initiated and thought. As such, it constitutes the prerequisite for both desire and judgement, and then, for action. As argued by Wedin (1988), imagination is not a faculty *per se*, but represents a transmission chain between sense-perception and intellection. Its specific role is to feed such faculties through images (*phantasmata*) produced by the five senses and rearticulated by the common sense.

The relation between the perceptive faculty and imagination has been widely debated. The former is assumed by Aristotle as "a kind of alteration" of the body-soul synolon (DA 416b). It happens when the body is affected by a sense-object through sensory faculties. Aristotle illustrates this in analogy with the impression seal, whereas "the sense is the recipient of the perceived forms without the iron and gold – it takes, that is, the gold or bronze sign, but not *as* gold or bronze" (424a). Such a receptive movement is capable of producing a material change at the corporeal level of the perceiver, for the compound of body and soul being like the wax when impressed by a sign, shifting its affective quality from potentiality to actuality. Perception occurs *in praesentia*, when the perceiver has a direct contact with a perceptual object as it is "put on the flesh" (423b). It is instantaneous, and terminates when objects are removed from sensory organs. Percepts (*aisthemata*) do not produce any response other than sensual registration.

It is exactly here that Aristotle introduces imagination, an intermediate space between sense-perception and thinking, *aisthesis* and *noesis*. Its function is duplicitous: first, it makes percepts available to contemplation and cognitive processes; second, by feeding appetite and desire, it grounds living movements such as judgement and action. In sum, imagination is for ensouled bodies both an aid to sense-perception and the precondition for the active exercise of intellect. According to Frede (2003), Aristotle grants imagination the capability of synthesizing sense-percepts. Imagination constitutes a 'field of vision' of otherwise incoherent sense-imprints, through which one can figure a broader order out of the congeries of bodily affections. By transcending sense-perception, it extends the temporality of

sense-percepts encapsulated within bodily affections. It does so in two ways: first, it offers *aisthemata* to retention; second, by paralleling these to on-going sense-percepts, it makes the simultaneity of perception possible. Frede stresses that “if imagination is responsible for the ‘wider picture of things’, then the simultaneity is not only the result of the need for causal continuity ... but necessary for the coherence and continuity of our perception as such” (286). Imagination combines myriad images into a single one, and through this it gives sense to present appearances. Rather than mere registration, this process is creative: for “the unified image cannot be traced back to a single perceptual experience, and so we now have an image that we never directly experienced, but that is a conglomeration of several independent perceptions” (Scheiter 2012: 263). This implies that, rather than to a single *true* image, different perceivers can be led to different percepts through the deployment of different *phantasmata*.

2.2 *The opacious light of phantasmata’s mere appearing: opinion and error*

Aristotle’s *phantasia* exceeds its modern conceptualization as ‘imagination’ – those of the empiricists, who maintain for a representative role for imagination as ancillary to subjectivity, and those of romanticists and postmodernists, who conceive it as *fancy* or *the imaginary*, an exercise of free creativity producing the *unreal* (Bottici 2014; Kearney 2000; Wunenburger 1997). Difficulties derive from lexical inconsistencies. The term *phantasia* is used in three different ways: as a capacity, the soul’s potentiality of making *phantasmata* manifest to an ensouled body; as an activity, the actual process through which *phantasmata* themselves are manifest; and as the product of such an activity, the images finding their way to one’s heart (Frede 2003). Moreover, its etymology indicates a different conceptual path from ‘imagination’. Descending from the noun *phaos*, ‘light’, and the verb *phainesthai*, ‘to appear’, *phantasia* acts “in a context where the verb *phainesthai* is not merely used but used in a phenomenalist style to express sensory or quasi-sensory ‘appearing’ in general” (Schofield 2003: 256). Aristotle’s imagination relates with the appearance of quasi-sensory contents, of whatever sense-organ, re-presented to one’s mind.

On a first level, these occur in passive ways, alongside and in support of *aisthemata*. *Phantasmata* are somehow parasitic to perception; nonetheless, they are the only object higher noetic faculties can apprehend, for they go beyond the brittleness of sense affections. On a second level, *phantasmata* are after-images produced *in absentia*. For Aristotle, “if one perceived nothing, one would learn and understand nothing ... Whenever one is contemplating, it is some image that one is contemplating” (DA 432a). After sense-objects are removed from sense-organs, what remains are nothing but images. Crucially, *phantasmata* are available to our body-soul compound “whenever we wish” (428a). In other words, we can dispose of images through voluntary activity of imagining. Loose from the contingency of sense-perception, *phantasia* can become a free activity. According to Aristotle, the main difference between sense-perception and imagination is that, while the former happens only when sense-object are present to sense-organs, the latter may emerge when sense-objects are present *and* when they are not.

Examples are offered by mechanisms of memory. Memory is for Aristotle a *phantasma* accompanied by the awareness of being the trace of a past perception. Present to soul's apprehension but separated from sense-organs, it belongs entirely to the realm of imagination. Just like any other image, memory might be passive as it irrupts spontaneously to one's mind (DM 450a 26). At the same time, memory can also be solicited and disposed to intellection. Sorabji (2012) argues that such activities constitute two distinct spheres, remembering and recollecting. The passive state is identified with remembering: "memory is explicitly said to be the having of an image when one is in a particular condition or state, demanding nothing more of the person or animal remembering ... Remembering *is* being in a certain state" (Bloch 2007: 75). Recollecting is instead the active process in which images are mobilized through perceptual associations. From image to image, we are capable of re-presenting a specific state or a specific apprehension to our soul. This practices might exceed one's intentions. Imagination "is not necessarily a contemplative or conscious act", as "our current perceptual experiences set in motion and combine with similar or associated images" (Scheiter 2012: 275). Images can move autonomously, rather than be simply moved by a subject's will.

Aristotle distinguishes between mere appearances, *phantom*, and real appearances, *phenomenon*. While perception is always true, imagination can either be true or false. Such a point implies the distinction between opinion or belief and intellection. As illustrated by Frede (2003: 281-82), "the *phantasia* that follows the perception of the special object (*idion*) of the senses (like colour of vision) is true while the perception lasts, but it can become false once the perception is over. The *phantasiai* following the perception of common objects (as that something is in motion) and of accidentals (that the white thing is a book) can be false with and without the perception". Differently from Plato, for Aristotle imagination is "only a half-way house on the way to *doxa*" (Sorabji 2003: 199). *Phantasmata* can be inaccurate and elusive, and they can also be deceptive, or even hallucinatory. As such, they can substantiate false beliefs and opinions. For Caston (1996), one of the main functions of imagination in Aristotle's psychology is precisely that of explaining error. For they are echoes of sense-perceptions, images do not coincide with them: as "sometimes this 'echo' is *modified* on its way to the central organ ... to say, then that the character of *phantasia* *derives* from the character of the sensation that produces it is *not* to require them to retain an identical character over time. A *phantasma* can change and so deviate from the original stimulation" (Caston 1996: 49). An example is that of dreams. Dreams are that form of imagination where past affections are disposed to one's soul during sleep. Dreams can be deceptive, as "persons in the delirium of fever sometimes think they see animals on their chamber walls because of the faint resemblance to animals of the markings thereon when put together in patterns" (DI 460b 10). For this, *phantasmata* cannot be considered as a fully reliable source for knowledge.

Images address opinion and, before the constitutive action of persuasion and conviction, give form to belief. These can resist to thought and knowledge, Aristotle stresses, in the exact same way as when the sun appears to us as being a foot wide even though we know that it is not. In order for our beliefs to be accorded to truth and understand that perception is determined by the condition under which our vision happens, we need to be aware of the deceptive dynamics which the appearance of *phantasmata* can give shape to. According to Aristotle, it is only through this that we can understand that our beliefs can be deceptive too and adequately correct them to the principles submitted by intellection.

2.3 *The bright light of nous: perceptive and deliberative imagination*

The first way in which Aristotle links imagination and intellection is a theory of action centred on desire. In DA 433b, he distinguishes two different kinds of imagination, perceptive imagination and deliberative or practical imagination. If perceptual imagination is identified with that capacity through which perceptual experiences are unified, deliberative or practical imagination is instead that capability on the premises of which thought can make decisions and choices. Such a capability lies on imagination, rather than immediately on *nous*, precisely because any *phantasma* upholds a complex temporality of affections for the living body – where the image of a good or bad affection experienced in the past evokes “the image of a future good or bad” (Frede 2003: 289). The operation through which “options are measured and the better pursued” consists in selecting and merging many *phantasmata* into “a single thing” (DA 434a). Deliberative imagination substantiates deliberative intellection: “the thinking faculty, then, thinks the forms in images, and, as what it should pursue or avoid is defined in the images, it is moved even in the absence of perception, whenever there are images before it” (431b). According to affections being good or bad, imagination stimulates the disposition of appetite or repulsion, desire and avoidance: “for in thinking, images play the part of percepts, and the assertion or negation of good or bad is invariably accompanied by avoidance or pursuit, which is the reason for the soul’s never thinking without an image” (431a). To think is to think in the form of images; to think, furthermore, is to dispose yourself to act in the world according to what images suggest you to.

Desire, the horizon towards which such a deliberative faculty aims at, is assumed as the causal principle for movement. Conceived as the one thing which is able to produce action on the basis of imagination, both desire and movement depends on imagination. It is the appearance of desire through imagination that makes choice and judgement possible. Consequentially, it is only through imagination that the unity of living bodies and living faculties is guaranteed. Aristotle thinks it absurd to separate desire from nutritive, perceptive, and imaginative activities (432b). In this sense, the activity of sense-organs fulfils its teleological capacity only by the means of imagination, because it is in reason of it that the synolon body-soul is disposed to living functions and towards the preservation of life (Johansen 1998).

The second interrelation of imagination and thinking regards theoretical intellection. For Aristotle, sense-perception is the faculty through which sense-objects are de-materialised as forms. Imagination, conversely, is the capability through which these can be intellectually apprehended; it is “like sense-perceptions except without matter” (431b). Perception and intellect differently relate with the objects they approach: while perception requires external objects to be present, intellection is performed *in absentia*. Intellect grasps its object only when this is de-materialised as pure form: “in the way, then, that things are separable from matter in general, in that way are things connected with the intellect” (429b). However, Aristotle theorises that objects of thought, the intelligibles, are encapsulated within material sense-objects. For these to be available to intellect, they have to be abstracted by matter. Imagination, therefore, has the function of providing a middle ground between perception and intellect, matter and thought, by extrapolating intelligible contents from the world of the bodies. Since imagination retains and triggers the appearing of forms, *phantasmata* “provide the substrate of all thought” (Frede 2003: 290), or better, the ‘content of thought’ (Caston 2009). By framing imagination as the pre-condition for thinking, it is implied that thought cannot happen without being originated from the sensible.

2.4 Aristotle’s intellects

Since we cannot think but through images captured by sense-organs, hylomorphism seems fully applied to rational thought. However, in the short chapter following this, DA.III.5, Aristotle distinguishes between two different kinds of intellect, only one of which appears to be attuned with such a theory.

On a first level, he maintains, there is a passive intellect, *nous pathetikos* or *nous dunamei*, intended as the potential capacity of acquiring knowledge through bodily affections. Passive intellect is compared to an empty tablet: “the intellect is in a way potentially the objects of thought, but nothing is actuality before it thinks, and the potentiality is like that of the tablet on which there is nothing actually written” (DA 430a). Once deprived by matter, its contents must be written by the means of imagination. Through this, passive intellect enters in direct relationship with the sensible, gaining the capacity “to become all things” (430a). The second kind of intellect is *nous poietikos*, commonly translated as active or agent intellect. Defined as “separate, unaffected and unmixed”, it is postulated as “immortal and eternal” (430a). Its function is that of producing movement: rather than that of becoming all things, it has the capacity to “bring all things about” (430a). The analogy is that of light: wherein light makes the vision of sense-object possible, the capacity of productive intellect is that of illuminating the intelligibles to the soul.

Elusively illustrated, the notion of active intellect seems to challenge the core principles of Aristotle’s psychology. As such a notion does not appear in any other of his writings, its centrality seems at odds with the rest of the treatise (Polansky 2007: 459). A number of questions have been posed by commentators. First, if the soul is not separable from the body, to what domain does the separated *nous*

poietikos belong to? Is it found inside or outside the body-soul compound? Is *nous poietikos* immaterial? Is hylomorphism refused and the dualism of body and soul reintroduced? Is the notion of an eternal active intellect making Aristotle's soul unperishable, just as for Plato? Or, as many commenters argue, is Aristotle using *nous poietikos* in order to suggest the intervention of the divine within human intellection? If active intellect corresponds to some higher intelligence, in what way might this affect *nous pathetikos*? If we maintain that there is a form of intellect ontologically other to the soul, in what way does such an intelligence, pre-personal in reason of its universality, act on individual body-soul compounds? And finally, how does *nous poietikos* intervene in the embodied processes of imagination?

3. Disputes on the nature of *nous poiêtikos*: between the human and the divine

Whilst of crucial importance within pre-modern and early-modern debates around Aristotle's theory of mind, knowledge, and metaphysics, the distinction between *nous pathetikos* and *nous poietikos* seems to represent a minor problem for later Western philosophy, even when of strict Aristotelian observance. As suggested by Caston (1999), it has ceased to be relevant as most of the interpreters have moved to accept Thomas Aquinas' stance, which upholds that both Aristotle's *nous* are immaterial faculties that entirely belong to human nature. For the wide majority of modern thinkers, Aristotle's duality of intellects entails mechanisms of thought and rationality that pertain uniquely to human mind, ontologically distinct from divinities' agency. For modern thinkers, said differently, to think is the act of a subject's will.

In what follows I do not try to seek a correct interpretation to Aristotle's text, nor to advance my own reading around Aristotle's position – for this, one should refer to the works of Wedin (1988), Caston (1999), Diamond (2014), and Cahoe (2014). The proposed survey aims rather at illustrating that the divergences of pre-modern interpretations provide the lines through which the problem of the divine in knowledge has been assessed. Following Henry Corbin (1981; 1997; 1977), I suggest that these streams have fed two specular ways of framing imagination and religion: a rational interpretation, that offers ground to exoteric understandings of religion; and a mystical interpretation, that argues instead in favour of an esoteric access to the sacred and to cosmologies. My argument is that, by recovering the latter, human geography can better frame religion beyond secularity. This will introduce to the theory of creative imagination synthesized by Corbin on the theosophy of Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi. I will contend that such a tradition, drawn through Neo-Platonist and Avicenna's takes on *nous poietikos*, radicalizes Aristotle's imagination to the point embodied hierophanies might transcend the dichotomies of subject-object, materiality-immateriality, and visible-invisible.

3.1 Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Peripatetic school

As reported by Brentano (1977), disagreements about Aristotle's *nous poietikos* have started among his disciples within the Peripatetic school. On one side, Theophrastus (371-287 BC) argues that both active and passive intellect have to be considered as immaterial. Nevertheless, in his understanding, both of these are to be assumed as fully human capacities. On the other side, Eudemus (370-300 BC) is instead testified for identifying active intellect with the immobile mover of *Metaphysics* Λ, that is, with God. While these works are available to us only in the form of fragments or through others' commentaries, the first treatises about Aristotle's corpus we dispose of are the *De intellectu* and *De anima* authored by Alexander of Aphrodisias (II-III century CE). His work is of particular interest for its broad diffusion across the Arab world and its impact on Islamic philosophy.

Alexander distinguishes between three different kinds of intellect. The first is potential intellect, which he refers to as *hylē* or material intellect. It corresponds to the soul's capability of acquiring knowledge by receiving them as forms deprived of matter (Tuominen 2010). The second intellect is intellect in act, or habitual. For it has the "habitus of actual cognition" (Fotinis 1979: 107.2), it is the faculty through which the body-soul compound apprehends intelligible objects. Alexander follows Aristotle for it is precisely through imagination that the receptive faculty is able of assuming the object's form as pure form. The difference between material intellect and intellect in act consists in that, whilst material intellect has only the potentiality of becoming all things, intellect in act "knows itself, because it becomes what it knows" (86.28). The intercourse between the first and the second intellect is granted by the *illuminative* action operated by a third intellect, identified with Aristotle's *nous poietikos*. Its function is presenting sensible objects to material intellect through abstraction.

For Alexander, *nous poietikos* is present in all things: its agency moves objects to our intellect; altogether, our intellect acts only in virtue of its action. Nevertheless, the active intellect does not belong to human nature and does not appertain to our soul, as it rather "comes to be in us from outside" (90.19). Alexander frames it as an entirely divine sphere, as the Unmoved Mover and self-thinking thought (Sharples 2002). *Nous poietikos* is crucial in cognitive processes exactly because, being the superior intelligible, it is also the principle of all objects and "causes the being of all the intelligibles" (89.4). As such, it is immortal and incorruptible. The agent intellect does not produce cognitive capacities, that are instead entirely human faculties we already dispose of since we are born. Instead, by offering intelligible forms to the apprehensive faculty of the material intellect, it makes us capable of activating and making use of the potential intellect.

Alexander eclectically synthesizes Aristotle's theory of first cause and the Platonic notion of supreme good, which grants a metaphysics of cognition centred on participation alien to Aristotle's thought. This

shift is illustrated by the status here given to the Aristotelian metaphor of light: “Alexander explains the production of things in terms of participation in that they derive from the supremely intelligible. Thus things are visible or good because of a kind of participation in the supremely visible or good ... where Aristotle considers light to be an indispensable condition for the visibility of colors rather than a supreme visible in which visible things participate” (Fotinis 1979: 326). By thinking the intelligibles and participating in the agent intellect, the intellect in act becomes, even though only temporally, identical with the divine. The relationship between active intellect and matter is conceived as instrumental and, consequentially, teleological: individual living bodies constitute the tools through which the divine is actualised through material intellect (Mittelman 2013). Its action is directly articulated on the things themselves, on everything it wishes to make visible to men. Living bodies are subordinated to divine processes of knowledge and subject to its agency; through what initiated by active intellect the hylic intellect becomes depositary of divine intentionalities.

An opposite understanding is brought by Themistius (317-388 CE). In the attempt of harmonizing Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s DA through Alexander’s teachings (Finamore 2011), his reading suggests that active intellect is complementary to potential intellect: although fully transcendental, it is located within the soul as an integrally human disposition. Human intellect, similarly to what argued by Theophrastus, is understood as a compound of the two conjoined intellects becoming intellect in act. Both of these are immaterial; integral to the soul, they constitute the form of living beings. Active intellect is available at our own will. Its role is that constituting individuation: “what it is to be me comes from the productive intellect alone, since this alone is form in a precise sense, and indeed this is a ‘a form of forms’” (Todd 2013: 100.30).

Once again, the analogy of light is revealing: “as light when supervening on potential sight and potential colours produces both actual sight and actual colours, so too this actual intellect advances the potential intellect, and not only makes it an actual intellect, but also constitutes its potential objects of thought as actual objects” (98.35). The function of active intellect is two-faceted: first, that of illuminating the intelligibles acquired through sense-perception, retained as *phantasmata*; second, to set human intellect free from the constraints of corporeity. For this, “the active intellect, functioning as a sort of light, activates both images in the soul, which are potential thoughts, and the human potential intellect; and it thereby enables the potential intellect to perceive actual thoughts and to become actual itself” (Davidson 1992: 26). The light of active intellect, in reason of its inner unity, produces a synthesis out of the multiplicity of sensory stimulus to be known. Through this, it “becomes multiple in different perceiving subjects. The unity and simplicity of the *lux spiritualis* ... becomes multiplicity and diversity in the *lumen*, as the unity of the intelligible, in active intellect, becomes multiple in the sensible, in potential intellect” (Hendrix 2010:15).

3.2 Aristotle in the early Islamic world

Aristotle's *DA* and *Parva naturalia* have circulated within the Arab world since the first decades of the Abbasid era on, ninth century C.E. (Peters 1968; Gutas 1998). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the reception of Aristotle's thought within early Islamic philosophy has mainly been channelled by two bodies of sources: on the one hand, the commentaries from the Peripatetic tradition; on the other, Neo-Platonic philosophy, especially the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus. The dissemination of commentaries compiled by the Peripatetic philosophers across the Islamic world has been extensively testified (Hesamifar and Baqershahi 2017). At the same time, it is widely recognised that Neo-Platonism impressed a long-enduring influence on Islamic thought, whereas elements of Plotinus' emanationist philosophy has been assimilated in Qur'anic exegesis as well as in cosmological and anthropological treatises. At the same time, it is well known that writings from that tradition have often been presented, read and understood as authentic works of Aristotle. Addressed by the necessity of theological agreement between these and Qur'anic revelations, the aim of early Islamic philosophy was, first, to harmonize revelation and Greek philosophy, and, second, to provide a unitarian reading of the latter. Aristotle ended up being "confused with Plotinus, reconciled with Plato, declared to be a disciple of Hermes, and even hailed as a venerable monotheistic sage" (Fakhry 2004: 280). Not surprisingly, such an intellectual context favoured the development of syncretic but often inventive re-elaborations of Greek classic philosophy.

For example, an anonymous paraphrasis of Books IV-VI of Plotinus's *Enneads* received many attentions across *falasifa* circles under the misleading name of *Theologia Aristotelis* (D'Ancona 2001). As much as for the *Liber de Causis*, a compendium of Neoplatonic theses in thirty-one or thirty-two propositions commonly attributed to Proclus, Aristotelian arguments were blended with Platonic themes within an integral Neoplatonic framework. Accordingly, these apocryphal treatises introduced across Islamic philosophers various Aristotelian notions a contaminated with an emanationist cosmology.

Similarly to Neoplatonist' tradition, the *Theologia* calls the first sphere and most pre-eminent entity as the One: conceived as a fully transcendent First Principle and assimilated with the divine, the One is the self-caused originator of a number of emanations that perpetually proceed from it. The *Theologia* do not claim any other attribute to the One other than that of being the causal principle of all spheres and beings – for this it is the matrix of apophatic theology within Islam. Through desire, the One radiates its first emanation, a cosmic *Nous*, repository of all the multiplicities, which in turn radiates a cosmic Soul, *anima mundi*, which radiates the world of nature, constituted by mutable and perishable entities – and then, of plants, animals, and humans. Intellect, an emanative instrument of the One, permeates every level of this scale; it provides all the forms found in lower levels, as purely spiritual prototypes of inferior entities. The Soul, differently from Aristotle's take, is eternal and indivisible. It is separated from the bodies, but it constitutes their *entelecheia*: in an intermediary position between *Nous* and the corruptible objects of nature,

such a world-Soul guarantees communication from the light emanating from the First Reason to the sensible world. Furthermore, it is through it that Reason can be reunified with the One, in a contemplative movement of return of the self-thinking thought to itself.

3.3 *Al-Farabi, between Peripatetic philosophy and Islamic Neoplatonism*

I would like now to briefly focus on the interpretation of *nous poietikos* provided by three Muslim thinkers, al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn ‘Sina), and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). These authors are the most influential interpreters of Aristotelian tradition of the period; altogether, their works are of particular interest for the attention they dedicate to imagination. The first of them, al-Farabi (259/872-337/950), was born in the region of current Kazakhstan but grew between Baghdad and Aleppo. In reason of its extended work on Peripatetic sources he is commonly acclaimed as the “Second Teacher”, whereas the first was Aristotle; in virtue of the originality of his emanationist ontology, he is also considered as the founder of Arabic Neoplatonism (Fakhry 2002).

Differently from Alexander, for al-Farabi *nous poietikos* does not correspond to God, which is rather maintained as the prime immobile mover, the First. His cosmology portrays nine celestial spheres emanated by the First, each composed by a cosmic *nous*, by the soul, and by a material body. Each intelligence, by thinking its own essence and desiring the First, emanates a lower sphere, and so forth. The lower of these is the Moon, through which the Aristotelian *nous poietikos* is emanated as the tenth and final incorporeal intelligence. Underneath the active intellect lies the sublunary world, within which five typologies of corporeal bodies (Sparavigna 2014). At this level the hierarchical scale is reversed, as the more perfect and complex is put in motion by the imperfect and simplest, through the active mediation of the forces descending from higher spheres. The lowest level is occupied by the four elements, that proceed to minerals, from there to plants, to animals, and finally to human beings, recognised as the more complex and complete beings across the terrestrial region. Active intellect represents the intermediary between the celestial spheres and intelligences and the sublunary world. It has three functions: first, causing the motion of the sublunary beings; second, irradiating their forms on matter – for this reason, it receives the name of *dator formarum*, *wahib al-shumar*, ‘giver of forms’; third, activating human’s intellect.

In what way does, according to al-Farabi, human knowledge happen? First, the *entelecheia* of human soul and body comprises five unified faculties: the vegetative, the sensitive, the appetitive, the imaginative, and the rational. Across these, the rational is the highest and prior of all, and is the faculty towards which all the others converge. It constitutes the storehouse of two species of intelligibles: first, that of the immaterial substances connoted as purely intelligible; second, that of those entities whose potential

intelligibility is hindered by matter. These – principles of geometry, ethics, and metaphysics – are universals that can be found within sensible objects and human imagination.

In order for these to be turned into intelligibles in act and to be available to human intellect, the intervention of the illuminative agency of *nous poietikos* is required. In spite of Aristotle's analogy of light, al-Farabi compares the active intellect to the sun. Illumination intervenes in human faculties in four ways: "it enters the eye, and turns potential vision into actual vision; it comes into contact with potentially visible colors and renders them actually visible; it itself becomes visible to the eye; and it also renders the sun, its source, visible to the eye" (Davidson 1992: 50-51). The analogy implies that, by the means of active intellect, material intellect is able, first, to access the first class of intelligibles; second, to abstract the forms out of the sensible objects that constitute the second class of intelligibles; third, to contemplate the material intellect as an object of thought; and finally, to contemplate the active intellect itself.

The *Phaos* emitted from the active intellect is, within al-Farabi's model, directly reflected upon that of the *phantasmata*. As said, imagination, *mutakhayyila*, is assumed as a fully-formed faculty that lies in immediate proximity, although on a lower level, to the rational. In a very similar vein to Aristotle, imagination has the key capacity of retaining sense-affections produced by perceptive acts and to make them available to cognitive processes *in absentia*. Correspondently to Aristotle's perceptive imagination, it owns the synthetic capacity of combining myriad spare images into a single one, for offering a wider vision to apprehension. Finally, and this is a profound renovation of Aristotle's scheme, imagination can stimulate the appearance of *muhakaf*, symbolic images that evoke and re-present the inward reality. Even though shaped in mimesis of *aisthemata*'s sensible reality, *muhakaf* cannot in any way be reduced to them..

What Al-Farabi is introducing is the possibility for imagination to manifest prophecy and revelation. The progression from *nous poietikos* to prophetic vision, guaranteed by imagination, is settled by the identification of active intellect with the Angel of Knowledge, the archangel Gabriel and Holy Spirit. Prophecy is received by the means of imagination through dreams as well as during the waking state. Revelation, on the other hand, can only be accessed by those, the sage and the philosophers, who have attained the highest degree of knowledge, the acquired intellect, '*aql mustafad*'. When knowledge reaches this perfect level, it enters "a state in which it is able to receive, through intuition and illumination, the Forms which are irradiated into it by the active Intelligence without passing through the intermediary of the senses" (Corbin 1993: 162). Even at this level, imagination plays a decisive role by making the sage and philosopher capable of rendering revelation in figurative forms. By the means of imagination prophecy can be effectively communicated for pedagogic aims, and be understood even by those who do not share the same level of intellect, and the same affinity with the active intellect, of the prophet or the sage. This does not mean that imagination simplifies prophetic signs to the extent of making them

immediately readable; on the contrary, it means that, through symbolism, imagination opens up their meaning to a plurality of readings to be interpreted through *ta'wil*, 'allegorical exegesis', methods.

3.4 *Avicenna and the Oriental philosophy*

Even though influenced by Aristotelian sources and Alexander of Aphrodisias, Avicenna's (Ibn Sina, 370/980-429/1037) thought has his main inspiration in al-Farabi. It is exactly with him, particularly within the visionary writings of his *Recitals*, that Islamic philosophy conceptualises, for the first time, the project for an authentic Oriental philosophy (Corbin 1960). In Avicenna, in fact,

"... reason becomes wedded to the Intellect, the external cosmos become interiorized, facts become symbols and philosophy becomes a veritable Sophia inseparable from the gnosis ... the goal of philosophy becomes not only the theoretical knowledge of substances and accidents of the cosmos but the experience of their very presence and actualization in such a manner as to enable the soul to free itself from the confines of the cosmos considered as a crypt" (Nasr 2008: 462-463).

The radical novelty of Avicenna's thought lies in fitting the active intellect within an angelology granting individuated human souls to be immediately attached to the celestial spheres. Avicenna postulates that by receiving the light emanated by active intellect one is able to enter in intimacy with the immaterial, extra-sensible but ostensible, higher realities. Importantly, his metaphysics allows this to happen "without the mediation of any magistrery or ecclesiastical reality" (Corbin 1997: 11). For Avicenna, the function of such a philosophy lies in nothing less than demonstrating the accuracy of religious revelation and faith through a vivid experiential approach to illumination, *ishraq*, as it is seen from within. His work ultimately radicalises al-Farabi's emanationist path to metaphysical knowledge as *ta'wil*, in a way that will later significantly impact Muslim theosophers such as Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi.

The notion of Oriental philosophy, rather than a mere reference to the geographical origins of its sources, evokes a geography founded on the symbolic opposition of a materialist Occident and a spiritual Orient. Such a metaphor is prompted by the analogy of light. For when facing East one is directly exposed to the light of the day, Orient is assumed as the "home of light", whilst conversely Occident becomes the "home of darkness" (Fakhry 2004: 163). Avicenna's philosophy aims at salvation through contemplative wisdom, as "the soul of man is caught as a prisoner in the darkness of matter and must free itself to return to the world of lights from which the soul of man originally descended. But in order to accomplish this difficult feat and be delivered from his 'Occidental' exile he must find a Guide who will orient him in the cosmos and lead him to his ultimate salvation" (Nasr 1997: 44). His cosmology, cast by "the hierarchy of Ten Cherubic Intelligences and the hierarchy of the celestial souls", coincides in many aspects with al-Farabi's, as "in the wake of the First Intelligence, the plurality of beings proceeds from a

series of acts of contemplation which in some sense turn cosmology into a phenomenology of angelic awareness of consciousness” (Corbin 1993: 171). Substance is composed by three categories, whose unity reverberates in a multiplicity of beings: *‘aql*, a completely immaterial intellect; *nafs*, a form-soul in search for bodies through which realizing its actuality; and *jism*, matter.

Elements of novelty are found in his anthropology and theory of knowledge, where the spiritual ubiquity of *nous poietikos* is further enhanced. As for al-Farabi, the active intellect, *al-‘aql al-quḍṣi*, is a separate intelligence belonging to the tenth sphere, in an intermediary position between the spiritual celestial spheres and the material sublunary world. Nevertheless, a remarkable difference is represented by active intellect’s agency in the constitution of body-soul compounds. First, it is the active intellect, and not the celestial spheres, that brings prime matter to the sublunary world by emanation. Active intellect is the causal principle of matter, while the celestial spheres have only an auxiliary role. Second, *nous poietikos* is entitled of directly insufflating the soul in those otherwise inert bodies belonging to the sublunary worlds, humans and non-humans. Rather than inherent to a specific body, the soul is for Avicenna only accidental to it; in fact, it pre-exists it as a separated entity of the *nous poietikos*. However, for Avicenna the soul finds its first *entelechia* as human soul, in the combination with a body qualified to receive it. It does not ontologically belong to the body it inhabits, but it is emanated precisely for being associated to it: “each body essentially requires that a soul originate for it and attach to it. Avicenna, then ... indicates that this attachment between body and soul is not such that the soul be imprinted in the body but rather such that the soul be busy with it and therewith be conscious of its own body and act on it” (Druant 2000: 265).

Avicenna claims that the reason why the soul finds its actuality through the union with the body lies in the fact that the body is instrumental to soul’s primary activity, the knowledge of the intelligibles and the reunification with active intellect. In other words, “the soul ‘desires’ material existence because in this way it attains its first entelechy: it ‘realizes’ its innate ‘potential’ for material existence. Subsequent possession and proper governance of material faculties thereafter pave the way for attainment of the soul’s second and final entelechy, return to the spiritual world in a more actualized form” (Health 1992: 66-67). This understanding is refined by two ontological allegations. First, despite descending from a cosmic sphere common to all beings, the active intellect, individuation is guaranteed by the knowledge that the body-soul compound accesses during its mortal life. Second, the soul has immortal nature: acquired through the conjoining of the soul and the body, individuation becomes a “perpetual feature of the soul” (Druant 2000: 263). The immortality of the soul does not depend whether one acquires or not a perfect level of knowledge during the course of mortal life, but is granted in reason of its immaterial, and then incorruptible, nature. As stressed by Druant (2000: 263), “because of the simultaneous temporal origination of both body and soul the soul has a disposition *hay’a* to a natural inclination to busy itself with its own body. Such disposition ... ensures that individuation persists even when in this world the

soul acts on its own or later and after its separation from the body”. Being the result of a direct emanation descending from the active intellect, during the time in which its union with a corruptible body is active, the soul aims at acquiring knowledge: it is only through material intellect that it can conjoin the higher perfection of cherubic intelligence.

For Avicenna, the soul disposes of three faculties. Each is differently distributed across sublunary beings: the *vegetative*, which controls the capabilities of nutrition, growth, and reproduction; the *animal*, divided in external faculties, through which the soul activates movement and action, and internal faculties, which pertains sense-perception and imaginative capabilities; and the *rational soul*, whose functions are both practical and theoretical. These faculties form a hierarchical structure, whereas the vegetative and the animal faculties converge in, and are coordinated by, the rational soul. The scope of the rational soul’s practical faculty is making sense of the external world; as such, it disposes of lower faculties for orientating its gaze towards the materialities that constitute the sensible world. The theoretical faculty is the capability of acquiring knowledge through the apprehension of the intelligibles; as such, it is the faculty through which one can access theophanies and metaphysics. It is divided in four moments: first, potential intellect, ‘*aql hawlani*’, the mere capacity for potentially knowing the intelligibles; second, habitual intellect, ‘*aql bi-l-malaka*’, whereas the material intellect apprehends the first intelligibles, logics, geometry, and ethics; third, actual intellect, ‘*aql bi-l-fi’l*’, the state in which intellect becomes able of actively practicing syllogism and to dispose of the primary and secondary intelligibles; and finally, acquired intellect, ‘*aql mustafad*’, the state in which intellect is indistinguishable from the intelligible. As it has been said, the condition of acquired intellect is the second *enthelechia* of the soul, its final end – the state in which the soul fully actualizes its angelic nature and becomes united with *al-‘aql al-qudsi*, the active intellect.

For Avicenna, there are four ways through which the rational soul is able to grasp the intelligibles. The first is direct emanation or infusion, a motion in which sense-objects have no role. The deployment of this capability is restricted to those individuals who have an innate predisposition for attaining knowledge through an immediate connection with the active intelligence. In virtue of it, it is possible to access the active intellect via imagination, during those moments in which it steps out from *aesthesia*, dreams and visionary wakes. The second proceeds from sense-perception, as ‘*aql bi-l-malaka*’, the material intellect, is able to recollect the intelligible forms elaborated by the imaginative faculty. The third is discursive knowledge and argumentative thought, through which the intelligibles become part of logical sequences composed by the first intelligibles obtained by imagination. Within this scheme, it is implied that the human soul is not able to create or to abstract the intelligibles by itself, but only to receive them “from without”, that is, directly from the *ishraq* operated by the active intellect. At the same time, it is possible for the soul to receive them as they are extracted by the action of lower faculties, sense-perception and imagination; nevertheless, even mere reception cannot happen without the illuminative intervention of

the active intellect. In being the Angel of Knowledge, *nous* illuminates potential intellect through the intelligible forms encapsulated within sublunary bodies – in accordance to al-Farabi and similarly to Alexander's take, which differs for it identifies this function with a divine one.

It is worth mentioning that Avicenna's philosophical framework is strictly dualistic and of Platonic observance, and it considers the body as a hindrance to the soul's capacities of apprehending the intelligibles emanated by the active intellect (Goodman 1969). In his ontology, higher states of knowledge can be indeed reached only when the soul is released from both the joined body and sense-objects. However, similarly to Aristotle, Avicenna offers a central role to the faculty of imagination for it provides a bridge between the sensible world and the purely spiritual intelligibles. Aristotelian *phantasia* is declined by Avicenna within the internal faculties of the animal soul. First, there is common sense, which corresponds to Aristotle's 'perceptual imagination', the coordinative capacity that "receives in itself all the forms imprinted on the external senses" in the form of images (McGinnis and Reisman 2007: 182). Second, there is retentive imagination, through which *phantasmata* processed by the common sense are preserved. Third, there is the compositive imagination, in virtue of which what stored within retentive imagination is creatively combined in new images. In later writings, Avicenna defines compositive imagination, when controlled by human intellect, as cogitative faculty. The nature of this faculty is dual and hybrid by nature. It is a "bodily faculty whose proper objects are sensible images and the estimative intentions associated with them"; furthermore, it is "also rational by definition, and as such it has some sort of access to the universal intelligibles that are the proper objects of an immaterial intellect" (Black 2013: 31). The ultimate role of cogitative imagination is preparing the soul to the emanation of forms occurred by *al-'aql al-qudsi*; specifically, it creates the preconditions for *ishraq* by providing an appropriate image that anticipates the intangible forms through the image of material exteriorities. As Brentano summarises (1977: 315), "for only the active intelligence gives natural things their forms, while the agency of the lower causes is everywhere merely preparatory and is limited to making matter suitable for the reception of the form ... the images are capable of nothing but preparing the material intellect for the reception of the emanation"; in fact, "the material intellect is illuminated by the light of the active intelligence and recognizes the general only if it looks upon the particular representations, which are in the imagination".

To conclude, Avicenna's cogitative imagination constitutes a common space between the immateriality of the intelligible realm and the materiality of bodily encounters with the cosmos. For it is "composed of an unmoved mover – the intellect – and a moved mover – the imagination", which allows Avicenna to "[uphold] his conviction that the human soul is essentially a subsistent intellect, whose sojourn in the body nonetheless circumscribes the methods by which it is able to gain access to the intelligible realm" (Black 2013: 73). Despite the similarities with Aristotle's understanding of imagination as the intermediate

capacity between intellection and sense-perception, Avicenna's psychology is transformed from that of its predecessors by *nous poietikos*, here conceived as the Angel of Knowledge or Holy Spirit, *al-'aql al-quḍṣi*. It is in virtue of this that Avicenna is able to frame the experience of knowledge as a mystical journey, a bridge directly connecting human soul with celestial spheres. Henry Corbin (1993) argues that it is exactly in reason of the decisive significance of the active intellect in *ta'wil* that such a philosophical system has been ferociously opposed and further marginalized by the advocates of literalism and dogmatic religion. In his words, "Orthodox monotheism was alarmed by it, since it was fully aware that far from being immobilized and directed by this Angel to a metaphysically inferior goal, the philosopher would be carried away by it to an unforeseen beyond, and certainly beyond established dogma" (173-174). As I will now illustrate, the rationalistic reaction against Avicenna's thought has been perpetrated by a philosopher who is commonly assumed, within Western histories of philosophy, as his direct descendent and higher disciple, Averroes.

3.5 Averroes' rationalistic *ta'wil*

The last philosopher to be presented in this section is the Andalusian thinker Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 495/1126-567/1198). His work constitutes in many ways a move out from the *falasifa* tradition towards rationalist Islamic philosophy. It is important to mention that Islamic Peripatetic philosophy, during the 11th Century, became the object of al-Ghazali's notorious refutation exposed in the book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Such a critique argued that al-Farabi's and Avicenna's thought was inadequate for discussing ontological questions, while profoundly misleading when not heretic in its theological assumptions. Al-Ghazali advanced a mystical approach to *ta'wil* as the only reliable way for accessing revealed truth and metaphysics – an approach that ironically was somehow very similar to what presented in Avicenna's esoteric writing, whose existence was unknown to al-Ghazali. Extensively articulated in his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* but implicit across all his philosophical venture, Averroes' response to al-Ghazali's attack aims at rehabilitating philosophy by eradicating any conflict between rigorous faith and free speculative inquiry. On the contrary, a rigorous philosophical enterprise is able to utterly clarify, rather than deform, scriptural contents and doctrinal principles. What he argues for is the ineffability of the principle of unity of truth, according to which the necessity of inward interpretation, *ta'wil*, is inevitably to be paralleled by systematizing outward knowledge in a coherent and complex philosophical organism. Averroes vehemently upholds the "parity of philosophy and Scripture, of reason and revelation, as the two primary and infallible sources of truth" (Fakhry 2004: 287).

Interestingly, his argument is pursued through a fervent rebuttal of Arab Neoplatonism, for re-establishing Aristotle's teachings in their own integrity. Averroes' contribution is addressed at amending Aristotle's commentators, from Alexander of Aphrodisias to Muslim philosophers, especially Avicenna, contested in reason of their eclectic readings framed within emanationist cosmologies – through which

they have “misunderstood or minimized the vast differences between Aristotle and his master, and in particular his sustained critique of the Platonic theory of ideas” (Fakhry 2004: 297). It is worth noting that even Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle significantly diverges from that of modern commentators, and it has been in turn contested as erroneous by later medieval scholars – as it is accounted with the important Thomas Aquinas’ treatise *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (McInerty 1993). However, following Henry Corbin’s historical work (1993), the most significant theoretical import of Averroes’ attempt of taking back Islamic philosophy on secure Aristotelian roots has been that of expunging the experiential factor from *ta’wil* methods, by abolishing the constitutive connection between active intellect and angelology as it was framed by Avicenna. Paradoxically, Averroes’ philosophical shift towards Aristotle’s mastery seems thus, from this angle, to have epistemically favoured exoteric understandings of religion and literalism, and then to have weakened the role of Islamic philosophy. It does so, and this point is of crucial importance here, by mutilating Avicenna’s ontological building of its angelology: rather than innocent, this move ends up considerably reducing, or even negating, the epistemic possibilities for one to directly experience hierophanic realities through the means of imagination.

I would like then to focus on Averroes’ theory of knowledge, by giving specific attention to the relationship between active intellect, the Aristotelian *nous poietikos*, and imagination. Averroes’ completely rejects al-Farabi’s and Avicenna’s cosmological account. The sole role he is apt to attribute to the active intellect is that of an immaterial entity that actualizes potential human intellect – a role that he assumes as the only authentic reading of DA.III.5. For Averroes, not only the active intellect but also the material intellect are immaterial, incorruptible and eternal substances neatly separated from the human soul. Averroes refutes Alexander’s theory of knowledge as materialist and naturalist, in reason of his conception of the material intellect as an epiphenomenal function of bodily dispositions. If the material intellect is that faculty in virtue of which one is able to receive the material forms, he argues, it cannot thus be anything material itself. Averroes’ position is, on the contrary, significantly closer to that of Themistius: the material intellect is essentially transcendental. It is an immaterial and immortal substance that, accidental to the human soul, “continually irrupts into the physical world to serve individual men” (Davidson 1992: 298). It is, crucially, a single substance shared by all humans, that joins the faculty of imagination for receiving the concepts extrapolated from sense-objects and captured in images.

Impassible and eternal, the active intellect is auxiliary to men’s material intellect for it illuminates the potential intelligibles retained by a knowing subject within *phantasmata*; in other words, it actively makes the images of sensible things preserved by imagination fully knowable by the hylic intellect. Interestingly, for Averroes (2009: 351-52), both of these “powers of the intellect” are available to us “when we wish”: it is then “necessary to ascribe these two activities to the soul in us, namely, to receive the intelligible and to make it, although the agent and the recipient are eternal substances, on account of the fact that these

two activities are reduced to our will, namely, to abstract intelligibles and to understand them. For to abstract is nothing other than to make imagined intentions intelligible in act after they were [intelligible] in potency”. To know is a movement that originates within imagination and culminates in the reception of intelligibles by the material intellect, after these are abstracted by the active intellect. As summarised by Leaman (1998: 88), Averroes’ monopsychism regards thinking as a faculty that lies in a middle ground between the physicality of a material world in becoming and the immateriality of eternal intelligibles, as it “involves the matching of the intelligible existing in the material intellect with the intelligible form existing in the image, and, while the former is universal and abstract, the latter is a predisposition of the imaginative faculty, a physical faculty which deals with individual and mutable phenomena”. The fact that both the material and the active intellect are eternal substances, external to the human soul and common to all humankind, has various problematic implications. In sum, it implies that “all who were, are, and will be, know whatever they know intellectually by the same cognizing faculty and through the activity of the same active power” (Brentano 1977: 317). How is it possible, then, that humans are able to attain different levels of knowledge and disagree about the identity of a single sense-object to be known? For Averroes the solution to this dilemma lies at the level of the imaginative faculty.

For we do not have or produce the same images, in reason of the different sensual disposition we are born with and develop through experience. The principle of individuation is accorded to the human soul through the knowledge of the corporeal world attained via sense-perception and *phantasia*: “through images in the imaginative faculty, the soul becomes conscious of intelligible thoughts. Consequently, although men share a common material intellect, each still owns his personal, individual actual thoughts, and thoughts are not shared” (Davidson 1992: 290). Last point, while human soul is mortal for it is inherent to the body, individuals’ images and imagination shape and renew the immortal material intellect and become united with the active intellect. After death, all soul becomes one. However, *ittisal*, the conjunction of the material intellect with the active intellect, can happen only when thought is disembodied and impersonal. If individuation is guaranteed by the use of imagination, it ceases when the soul is detached from matter. Only mere knowledge of intelligibles, of abstract universals independent from both the sensible world and individuation, is able to survive the decay of the body.

If knowledge is strictly dependent on the dynamism that proceeds from matter to the material intellect, ascending from *aisthesis* to compositive imagination, is there for Averroes any possibility left for the human soul to enter in direct relation with higher intelligence? First, in accordance with Aristotle’s DD, Averroes denies the reliability of prophecy and revelation as source for theoretical intellect. If dreams and visions are dependent on sense-percepts, humans are not capable of receiving the divine by their means – if they can ever, Averroes argues, it is because they are angels and not men. In order to gain knowledge, one has rather to fully rely on rationality: on the one hand, on senses and sense-perception,

and on the other, on study and theoretical intellection. Revelation is for Averroes only another name we can give to higher philosophical reason. Second, within Averroes' philosophy an intimate union with divine intellect is made impossible. Even in the afterlife, such a union is possible only insofar as the soul is dispossessed of its own individuality, of its *personality*. The active intellect is here a transcendental entity common to all men that only accidentally enters in communication with the human soul. Differently from Avicenna, it is not directly connected to individuality, as its only activity is that of illuminating any intelligible disposed by the imaginative faculty. Following Corbin (1997: 17), it can be said that Averroes' philosophy, through the mutilation of Avicenna's angelic hierarchy, initiates a process of "*desecration*, a metaphysical decline of the *sacred*, that no canon law either codifies or compensates. This process of desecration begins with the individual, whom it strikes in his innermost depths. Averroism denies the human individual as such any possibility of becoming eternal".

Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's corpus have widely circulated within the Western world since the XII century and have been read by a broad scholarship, from Jewish thinkers belonging to Maimonides' circle to Christian scholars such as Siger of Bramant and John of Rochelle. Averroes' philosophy, as much as that of the Latin Averroists, has been of crucial importance for the development of Christian Scholasticism through the confutation made by Thomas Aquinas. Exposed in both his commentary on Aristotote's DA and in the treatise *De unitate intellectus*, Thomas' rebuttal is two-faceted (Haldane 1992; McInerty 1993). On the one hand, it is directed against Averroes' theory of knowledge. According to Thomas, monopsychism is incapable of addressing both the individuality of human intellect, sealed in the principle of *hic homo intelligit*, and moral responsibility. On the other, Averroes is criticised in reason of his account on the mortality of human soul. Thomas' solution conceives the soul as an immanent form to the body, the incorruptible animating essence of one's individuality. Accordingly, both the material and the active intellect are assumed as intrinsic to the individual soul, instrumental to the development of human's personality allowing the soul to survive the body. The function of *nous poietikos*, for Thomas, is actualizing the cognitive processes finalized by the material intellect. Neither is a separated substance, and neither is divine but rather an entirely human disposition: "just as possible intellect's operation, which is to receive what is intelligible, is attributed to a human being, so too is agent intellect's operation, which is to abstract the intelligibles. But that could be so only if the formal principle of that action were conjoined to [a human being] in its existence" (Aquinas 1999: 101-106).

Whilst the shift Averroes is neat, Thomas and Averroes share a similar understanding, inasmuch as they clearly separate human knowledge from celestial intelligence. Be it transcendental as in Averroes or immanent as in Thomas, Aristotelian *nous poietikos* assumes the profile of something entirely *human*, a physiological disposition available to cognitive processes in support of disengaged reason.

4. Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi: vision, imagination and the imaginal world

Despite its wide dissemination and influence across the Western world, the impact of Averroes' rationalistic philosophy cannot be said to have been equally significant on the development of Islamic philosophy. In the words of Corbin (1993: 242),

"The name of Averroes is one that evokes a powerful personality and an authentic philosopher of whom more or less everyone in the West has heard. The misfortune is that in this case Western vision has been lacking in perspective ... It has been repeated over and over again that Averroes was the greatest name and the most eminent representative of what has been called 'Arab philosophy', and that with him this philosophy attained its apogee and its goal. In this way we have lost sight of what was happening in the East, where in fact the work of Averroes passed as it were unnoticed. Neither Nasir Tusi, nor Mir Damad, nor Mulla Sadra, nor Hadi Sabzavari had any inkling of the role and the significance attributed by our textbooks to Averroes-Ghazali polemic. If it had been explained to them they would have been amazed, as their successors today are amazed".

Corbin's point is that the pre-eminence of Averroes' speculative thought in Western philosophy can be explained by the fact that he paved the way to a desacralized understanding of human intellection, according to which human *psyche* is to be intended as ontologically detached from an objectified cosmos graspable only by the means of detached observation and reason. Many Muslim thinkers, nevertheless, followed other paths, and others have formalised anthropological and psychological models postulating unity of being within cognitive processes that render the religious experience without connoting it as unreal. This tradition in Islamic philosophy, scarcely acknowledged across the Western world, has given specific attention to the concept of imagination. Imagination is here conceived not as the capacity of a disengaged subject for producing fictional images but rather as a noetic realm in which epiphanic manifestations of the divine are realised. Imagination constitutes the site where different orders of reality, the sensible and the extra-sensible, the seen and the unseen, can dialogue.

This section makes a step back from Averroes' rationalistic turn in order to emphasise the vivid legacy of Avicenna's Oriental philosophy across the Muslim world, the roots of esoteric patterns of knowledge and spiritual practices. In particular, I focus on the contribution of two mystics, Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi, who renovated the philosophical framework provided by Arab Peripatetics for finally giving impetus to an autonomous Islamic philosophy. This philosophy, for centuries neglected in the West, is here summarised by looking at two elements: on the one hand, the rebuttal of the dichotomy of subject-object and its favour towards the radical unity of existence; on the other, the interweaving of imagination as an individual faculty, *mutakhayyila*, and the imaginal world, *alam al-mithal*, the realm in which such a

unity is actualized. It is worth mentioning that this summary of the work of the two philosophers and mystics, remarkably vast and often presented in a deliberately polysemic language, is partial and unexhaustive. Furthermore, its contents and orientation are largely based on the interpretation provided by Henry Corbin (1998; 1989) and his followers, such as William Chittick (1989; 1994; 1998) and Hossein Nasr (1997; 2007).

A way to effectively illustrate the historical significance of Suhrawardi and Ibn ‘Arabi in relation to the previous *falasifa* tradition, as well as the role they programmatically aim at playing, is offered by two symbolic vignettes presented by each of them in their work. Suhrawardi reports in fact that, once, Aristotle appeared to him in a dream-vision. Within this revelatory dream, Aristotle suggested that the pathway that conducts to the purest source of knowledge cannot be found in Peripatetics’ analytic enquiry, neither in al-Farabi’s nor in Avicenna’s thought. Nonetheless, only the Sufists can be “real philosophers” for they only are fully able to pursue truth wisdom, which is always experiential (Nasr 1997: 62). To gain true knowledge, Aristotle said, one has to first understand himself – what exactly to know yourself means within Suhrawardi’s philosophy will be briefly clarified in what follows.

If this episode belongs to the realm of dream-visions, Ibn ‘Arabi’s vignette belongs instead to the everyday historical or empirical world. It is told that the young Sufi thinker met Averroes in Cordova, at his own place, as the Aristotelian philosopher wanted to converse with him about his studies and spirituality. During their encounter, Averroes interrogated Ibn ‘Arabi about the virtues and results of the Sufi paths of knowledge if compared to a rationalist approach. In the words of Ibn ‘Arabi,

“He [Averroes] asked me this question: ‘What manner of solution have you found through divine illumination and inspiration? Is it identical with that which we obtain from speculative reflection?’ I replied: ‘Yes and no. Between the yes and the no, spirits take their flight from their matter, and heads are separated from their bodies’. Averroes turned pale, I saw him tremble; he murmured the ritual phrase ‘There is no power save in God’ – for he had understood my allusion” (Corbin 1997: 42).

4.1 Suhrawardi’s theory of light and vision

Suhrawardi was born in north-western Persia in 549/1154 and died by execution in Aleppo at the age of 36. He was the founder of the school of Illuminationism, whose fundamental characters are exposed in a nutshell in his masterpiece *Hikmat al-ishraq* (1999). The greatest import of his thought is that of bringing to extreme consequences both Avicenna’s project for Oriental philosophy and the metaphor of light introduced by Aristotle and reiterated by the Peripatetics. For what concerns the first point, Suhrawardi’s work is in fact partially a work of synthesis, in which various elements from disparate authors and traditions are read in a novel way within a strict Muslim framework. His sources can be found across

Islamic philosophers, from Neoplatonism to Sufism, from Avicenna to al-Ghazali, on Platonism and Pythagoreanism, as well as on religious traditions such as Hermeticism and Zoroastrianism. According to his view, Avicenna's project of Oriental philosophy was weakened by the fact that such sources were to him unfamiliar.

However, Suhrawardi's Oriental philosophy cannot be understood only in reference to the mere geographical origins of its sources. Its rationale has to be found within the *ishraqi* cosmological system of which it is integral expression, dominated by a complex hierarchy of irradiated and irradiating lights. The first light of this system is God, identified with the light of lights; God is the source from which all lights, immaterial as well as corporeal beings perpetually proceed. Such an emanative framework is founded on a dialectic of light and darkness: all bodies are isthmuses, *barzak*, that await illumination; consequently, all things present various degrees of light and luminosity according to their capacity to be irradiated. As summarised by Razavi (1997: 79), "light is that which at the same time unites and differentiates ... among all existing beings through its intensity and weakness ... being light is not the differentia but what is common among them all". Suhrawardi's take on Oriental philosophy unfolds a visionary geography permeated by the irradiating presence of the sacred light. The East-West axis must therefore not to be thought as horizontal, but rather as vertical, whereas Orient is the world of pure *ishraq* and spiritual intelligences to which one ascends to for finding illumination and Occident is instead the world of darkness and materiality – that is, the world we are confined to if we refuse to receive illumination and restrict our vision to what predicted by senses and materiality. To be exposed to the Orient is then to orientate your heart to the only realm in which true knowledge can be found, that from which lights originate and are constantly in the process of being irradiated.

Suhrawardi conceives his theory of knowledge in strict dependence to an angelology. Every man is individuated by receiving a human soul from a guardian angel that belongs to the cherubic world of lights. This angel is moved by love as he donates half of his soul to a body that lies within the material world; the other half, nevertheless, remains within the angelic sphere and constitutes the inescapable, everlasting bond between an angelic being and an ensouled body. With Corbin (1993: 213), it can be argued that "every species is an 'icon' of its Angel, a theurgy effected by this Angel in the *barzak* which in itself is death and absolute night". In reason of this, the human quest consists in a perpetual seek for the other missing part. In the words of Nasr (1997: 74), "man's entelechy is therefore to become once again unified with his spiritual 'self', with his angelic prototype which is his real 'self' and which he must 'become' in order to 'be'; that is, ... he cannot attain peace and bring to an end this wandering as a lost child in the maze of the cosmic labyrinth until he has reunited with his guardian angel which is his real 'self'". Angelology is essential to Suhrawardi's theory of knowledge precisely because the means by which we can access the angelic realm are those of intellection. It is so because, within this ontology, "angels are

also representations of man's inner forces that have been externalized. The externalization serves as a spiritual map of the inner guides" (Razavi 1997: 83). To know yourself is the primary condition for access the immaterial cosmos of celestial lights, essentially because of the angelic origin of our soul. Self-knowledge is a pathway to have knowledge of the divine; to know the divine, within the *Isbraqi* philosophy, is to have an experience of it from within your own self – by *presence*.

Suhrawardi's epistemology is centred on his theory of vision, a theory that constitutes a confutation of the dualism between subject and object, knower and known. This is guaranteed by the ubiquity of light as the principle for unity of being. As argued by Ziai (2007: 809-810), light constitutes for Suhrawardi what *nous poietikos* did for Peripatetics, with the difference that, rather than "stationary and discretely distinct from the other nine intellects above it", it is "continuously moving and propagating its essence". To have vision, according to this philosophy, is when a subject is aware of the presence of a given object, which can be manifest only as it is itself illuminated from within. In order to have sight it is required the complete removal of any *bijab* between what sees and what is seen; the veil of darkness cannot be torn away but through the irradiation of light. In other words, Suhrawardi holds that vision and sight are granted by the inner ubiquity of light: if we are able to see, it is fundamentally because there is an ontological continuity between our being and that of the essence we are present to.

Such a continuity does not have to be confused with identity, for different beings are individuated by the action of the angel guardian they are bound with. Nevertheless, this distinction is meaningful only when vision is thought and performed within the boundaries of the realm of the empirical, the world of bodies, which is accessible through the lower animal faculties; diversely, higher wisdom, made possible by an experiential act of intuition, consists in a process in which your own self, *dhat*, is unveiled and unified with other lights irradiated from the divine. In virtue of this unified model, "there is no disjunction in reality, but only gradations of the manifestation of essence" (812). Nevertheless, to know light itself one needs to be present at the light of the self. In order to do so, it has to be able to transcend the *barzakb* of his own body and that of the world, for turning his gaze at the lights themselves. In other words, it is necessary to activate a sensitivity that exceeds sense-organs and belongs to imagination – disjointed from *aisthesis* and sense-percepts and oriented towards the domain of angelic beings.

But how is it ever possible? The solution is to be found within the domain of an intermediate realm, the realm "through which spirits are embodied, and bodies spiritualised" (Corbin 1989: 84). For imagination to be able to transcend the senses, it requires gaining access to an intermediate sphere that, if not that of immaterial lights, is not that of material bodies either. Such domain is defined by Suhrawardi as *alam al-mithal* – which literally means 'the world of form', but has found its better translation with Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*. What is this world and what function does it play in Islamic philosophy?

4.2 Ibn 'Arabi's creative imagination

Whilst the concept of *alam al-mithal* does not find extensive treatment in Suhrawardi's philosophy, it constitutes a dominant theme in Ibn 'Arabi. Born in Murcia in 560/1165, during his life the Sufi *shaykh* travelled the whole Islamic world – from Cordova, where he met Averroes and assisted to his funerals, to the Mecca, where he composed his masterpiece, *Futubat al-makkiyah*, before dying in Damascus in 638/1240. Ibn 'Arabi's work is vast and heterogeneous, as alongside his extended writings in metaphysics and philosophy, it includes various treatises in cosmology, practical methods in meditative techniques, and poetry. Ibn 'Arabi cannot be considered a philosopher in the Peripatetic sense, but rather as a Sufi master whose cohesive doctrine has also been articulated towards paths previously crossed by metaphysics. For he attempts at adjoining doctrinal rigour and practical methods for spiritual training, it can be said that “his aim is not to give an explanation that is mentally satisfying and rationally acceptable, but a real *theoria*, or vision of reality, the attainment of which depends upon the practice of the appropriate methods of realization” (Nasr 1997: 102). His writings aims at harmonizing three different body of sources, received ‘vertically’ as theophanic revelations and acquired during waking and dream-visions: first, the contemplation of nature; second, the contemplation of the self and of inward states of the soul; third, the *surah* of the Qur'an. These three embodied sources are recurrently interrogated, rather than through discursive reason, through *ta'wil* methods, for they are able to reveal the same truth by different means and symbols. The teachings of Ibn 'Arabi suggests that, in order to reach a higher knowledge and to discover the reality of every manifestation, one must be able to penetrate the *batin* of every *zahir*, that is, the inward dimension of every appearance, the inner truth occulted by every phenomenal surface.

Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine is established by a radicalization of the principle of *tawhid*, that is, the principle of Unity of God professed by Islam. According to an esoteric perspective, rather than as a static condition in which the uniqueness of the transcendental divine is affirmed, *tawhid* must be understood as a verb – an inescapable reality that is constantly on the process of being realised through a plurality of degrees of existence (*maratib al-wujud*). Even though not nominated as such within his work, the most important notion of Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy is usually assumed to be that of *wahdat al-wujud*, commonly rendered as ‘unity of being’ or ‘unity of existence’. The concept of *wahdat al-wujud* is rooted on the Avicennan distinction between *wujud* (nondelimited existence) and *manjud* (delimited existent, *ens*): for Ibn 'Arabi, *wujud* corresponds to an unaffected, over-arching and eternally absolute indeterminate realm, while any *manjud*, be it material or not, constitutes its self-determination and creatural expression, “an accident qualifying ‘existence’, and determining it into a certain phenomenal form” (Izitsu 1971: 39). According to this notion, the universe lies in a perpetual state of creation, wherein the Principle, in reason of its wish to be known in its solitude, discloses itself in both inward or outward forms through an indefinite multiplicity of beings that, determined and distinct, have always existed anywhere but in God. The *Shahadah*, the Muslim profession of faith and Islam's first pillar, is reformulated by Ibn 'Arabi with the

adjoining of a second precept: “There is but one God” is completed with “and there is nothing but God”. In accordance to the Qur’an, God is the absolutely transcendent principle; nonetheless, the Sufis interpret its unconditional otherworldliness apophatically, by postulating that it cannot be expressed but negatively, as the negation of every negation. God is inferred as wholly out of time and out of space, non-manifest and utterly incomparable from the creatural realm, the cosmos, that proceeds from the *Divine Breath* and its *Sigh of Compassion* (*Nafas al-Rahman*). All the beings that institute the world of appearances represent his manifestation; they are distinct from God but are comprised by his own reality. As summarised by Nasr (1997: 107), “what Ibn ‘Arabi wishes to assert is that the Divine Reality is distinguished from its manifestations and is transcendent with respect to them, but that the manifestations are not in every respect separate from the Divine Reality which somehow encompasses them”. All beings are nothing but a theophany, living a tension between their own phenomenical singularity and their irreducible unity.

A number of symbolisms are used within Ibn ‘Arabi corpus in order to describe the notion of *wahdat al-wujud*. One is that of the waves, whose multiplicity is continuously produced and resolved by their common essence, the sea. Each wave *appears* as a singularity, and is constitutively different from the other; nonetheless, this appearance is both illusionary and transitional, as it is continuously unveiled, discharged but also replicated by the breaking of each wave within the sea. Another one is that of the circle, whereas the centre represents existence, the circumference is the progress of and indefinite multiplicity of epiphanies, and the radii that conjoin the centre and every point of the circumference denote the relation of dependence that every single entity has towards unity (Corbin 1997). This symbolism shows how the centre, the *wujud*, is completely unaffected by the continuous unravelling of the circumference, its creatural manifestation; altogether, it illustrates that every point, every *manjud*, is essentially equidistant from the centre, and that every radius proceeds in two senses – therefore, that everything proceeds to and from an immobile but all-encompassing *wujud*. What Ibn ‘Arabi conveys with these symbolisms is that all the creatures, substantially non-divine, are equally integrated in an organism of unity and multiplicity and equally dependent from the centre (Ventura 2017): as much as every multiplicity is dependent and expressed by unity (*ahadiyyat al-katra*), unity itself is necessarily multiplicity (*katrat al-wahid*). The notion of *wahdat al-wujud* has often been the object of accusations of pantheism, and thus of heresy. However, the accusation of pantheism needs to be rejected because, by affirming the absolute transcendence of God, Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontology exceeds any assumption for a substantial continuity between the divine and the universe. According to Landau (2008: 23), Ibn ‘Arabi is instead “the sole Muslim thinker who, while accepting the uncompromising monotheism of the Qur’an, succeeded in providing that gospel with a philosophical interpretation that resolves the innumerable problems of duality as implied by the seemingly mutually contradictory statements of Islam’s holy text”. Rather than pantheism, what *wahdat al-wujud* affirms is ultimately the absolute non-duality of existence, by finding an authentically

monotheistic balance between the absolute transcendence of God and the plurality of creatures assumed as its direct manifestation – which can be somehow defined as theomonism (Corbin 1981).

Whilst God is unknowable in the purity of its own essence, the all-encompassing *wujud* is altogether ‘unseen’ (*ghayb*) in its spiritual dimension and ‘seen’ (*sabada*) and knowable in its creatural determinations – in other words, nondelimited *wujud* can be approached by observing the multiplicity it embraces as it is displayed by a plurality of *manjud*. Said differently, we are able to know God, even though only partially, by contemplating his self-manifestation within bodily and non-bodily creatures, across living beings and the nature. As argued by Chittick (1994: 12), “*wujud* is invisible in itself, but nothing can be seen without *wujud*; or rather, we see nothing but *wujud*, made diffuse and visible by the veils that are the created things”. Being is essentially one, undistinguished and unified; plurality is illusorily produced by the multiplicity of receptacles it uses as its loci of manifestation. Divine epiphanies occur in physical spaces, defined as *mazahir* (singular *mazhar*), the material substance through which they appear in the world of bodies.

The key for understanding the ambivalence between *alam al-ghayb*, the invisible world of undisclosed *wujud*, and *alam al-sabada*, the visible world of disclosed *manjud*, relates to Ibn ‘Arabi theory of creation. Altogether, such a vision introduces also to his theory of knowledge, in which our place within this order is undisclosed. As explained by Henry Corbin in his pivotal monograph on the Sufi *shaykh* (1998), Ibn ‘Arabi seems reluctant to conceive creation as *ex nihilo*, for non-being is nothing else than the occultation of being. Creation is a recursive act of active imagination in which things that already existed in the state of unrevealed potentiality proceed to be manifest as images in sensible matrices and bodily forms; in Corbin’s words, “creation is Epiphany (*tajalli*), that is, a passage from the state of occultation or potency to the luminous, manifest, revealed state; as such, it is an act of the divine, primordial Imagination” (186-187). Creation is thus articulated as the process in which a divine being, moved by the desire to be known, exhales through his *breath* a *cloud* of pure *wujud* that receives all forms and gives them their being.

The existential reality of things is veiled by the images they are encapsulated with as manifested creature, by their *mazahir*: the *hijab* of their own materiality can become as thick as to be the only thing that one can perceive, or it can contrarily become so transparent that *wujud* can be fully manifest to vision. We can grasp from images nothing but their own materiality, or we can rather penetrate their inner intelligibility. The object of our empirical vision is still the same: a myriad of places in which nondelimited existence occurs, that is, a myriad theophanies; however, while the immediate content of our empirical world remains the exterior qualities of the loci of manifestation as taken in their delimited materiality, what is manifest to the esoteric vision is instead the oneness that is disclosed while at the same time partially veiled through them. A common example, introduced by Ibn ‘Arabi but reiterated across many Sufi writings, is that of a single image reflected in countless mirrors: “These reflections obviously cannot exist

without Him, and, in a way, they are He. At the same time they are obviously not He. They are He when we are aware that the reflected image is but a reflection; they are not He when we forget the object they reflect and accept them as final realities” (Landau 2008: 32). The notion of *wahdat al-wujud* is, then, a doctrine of unity of multiplicity and of multiplicity of unity: what we can perceive through everyday sense-perception is only the illusions of multiplicity, ostensive of an utter and over-arching unity; for Ibn ‘Arabi, what we need to realise is that what we perceive is nothing but the same reality, the divine essence as it is reflected within the creatural.

Every quality is negated from God as he is completely transcendental; at the same time, every quality to be found at the level of the *alam al-sahada* cannot be but the first immediately tangible image of his undisclosed reality. God is in fact above all qualities and determinations. It contains them all but transcends them all, for its unity is utterly indivisible: as the Sufi motto says, all the Divine qualities “are neither He nor other than He” (109). Apophatically, these qualities only partly correspond to the ninety-nine divine names classified within the Qur’an, that in the doctrine constitute the possibilities through which *wujud* can be revealed within the cosmos and be accessed by men. In fact, “they are the means by which God manifests Himself in the world just as He describes Himself in the Quran through them. The Names are thus the pathways leading toward God and the means by which one can ascend to the unitive knowledge of the Divine Reality” (Nasr 1997: 109). For creation is a perpetual process through which Divine Names appear within the cosmos. Consequentially, it is in virtue of the names that the cosmos is primarily a set of mirrors in which the real of *wujud* is perpetually reflected and renewed. When manifest within the external world of appearances, every Divine Name becomes a Divine Attribute, a phenomenal object that can or can be not material. Of crucial importance for accessing theophanies and their undisclosed reality, the search for the Qur’anic divine names as pure essences cannot be gained through rational intellect only, as this is disengaged from their sensory qualities; one must be able to access them by using other means capable of granting access to the space in between the sensory features, their *ẓahir*, and their immaterial intelligibility, their *batin*. How then?

Here lies the central point of Ibn ‘Arabi’s epistemology. If creation is essentially the disclosing of the invisible in the visible, if it is nothing but creative imagination, then also the vision through which we can access the domain of *batin* cannot be that of sense-perception nor that of disentangled reason, but that of imagination.

“To the initial act of the Creator imagining the world corresponds the creature imagining his world, imagining the worlds, his God, his symbols. Or rather, these are the phases, the recurrences of one and the same eternal process: Imagination effected in an Imagination (*takhayyal fi takkhyal*), an Imagination which is recurrent just as – and because – the Creation

itself is recurrent. The same theophanic Imagination of the Creator who has revealed the worlds, renews the Creation from moment to moment in the human being whom he has revealed as His perfect image and who, in the mirror that this Image is, shows himself Him whose image he is” (Corbin 1998: 188).

How is then imagination conceived? For Ibn ‘Arabi, imagination operates on three different domains. The first one, as it has been already said, is that of the cosmos. At this level, imagination is unrestricted (*ḵhayal mutlaq*), as the act of theophanic revelation that coincides with creation per se. It is, as shown, the moment in which God is self-disclosed and self-manifest upon a myriad theophanic receptacles – in the creatural, in ensouled bodies and in the elemental.

On a second domain, imagination is instead a world in itself, that is, the *alam al-mithal*, the world of correspondences, rendered by Corbin as *mundus imaginalis*. Within this level, imagination (*ḵhayal munfasil*) operates as an active force within an in-between world, an extra-sensible *barẓakeh* that lies underneath the world of pure spirits and just before the world of bodies. The function of this world is precisely that of constituting a middle ground for the encounter of two different orders of reality – the world of sensible forms and the world of pure intelligibles. For Ibn ‘Arabi the world of imagination is as real as the other two. Even more, it is the realm that guarantees the transition of forms between different levels of reality, that is, the communication of archetypal images from the cherubic spheres to the domain of bodies and materiality. The *mundus imaginalis* is, in fact, the locus in which the spirits and abstract meanings of the *alam al-ghayb* finds their bodily form; altogether, it is where visions actualized in the *alam al-shahada* are purified by their material veil and associated to their higher correspondence. In the words of Corbin (1989: ix), “on the one hand it immaterialises the Sensible Forms, on the other it ‘imaginalises’ the Intellectual Forms to which it gives shape and dimension. The Imaginal world creates symbols on the one hand from the Sensible Forms, on the other from the Intellectual Forms”. First then, the *alam al-mithal* is the sphere

“... where not only the visions of the prophets, the visions of the mystics, the visionary events which each human soul traverses at the time of his *exitus* from this world, the events of the lesser Resurrection and of the Greater Resurrection ‘take place’ and have their ‘place’, but also the *gestes* of the mystical epics, the symbolic acts of all the rituals of initiation, liturgies in general with all their symbols, the ‘composition of the ground’ in various methods of prayer (*oraison*), the spiritual filiations whose authenticity is not within the competence of documents and archives, and equally the esoteric *processus* of the Alchemical Work, in connection with which the First of the Shi’ites was able to say ‘Alchemy is the sister of Prophecy’.” (xi).

Second, and consequentially, it is also the realm that guarantees an encounter between creative imagination of the Creator that imagines the world of bodies and human imagination that imagines the Creator. In fact,

“... to perceive through the figures which they manifest and which are the eternal hexeities, that they are other than the Creator and nevertheless that they are He, is precisely to effect the encounter, the coincidence, between God's descent toward the creature and the creature's ascent toward the Creator. The ‘place’ of this encounter is not outside the Creator-Creature totality, but is the area within it which corresponds specifically to the Active Imagination, in the manner of a bridge joining the two banks of a river” (Corbin 1998: 188).

In other words, *ta'wil* can happen for Ibn ‘Arabi only within the realm of the *mundus imaginalis*.

There is a third domain for imagination, and it is the one in which human imagination is realised (*khayal muttasil*). For Ibn ‘Arabi, man is constituted by two elements, spirit and body, which are its *batin* and *zahir* realms, coordinated by a mid *barzakh*, the soul. Soul, in accordance to Avicenna’s scheme, has three functions: the vegetative, the animal, and the rational – which is independent from the body but makes use of it as a vehicle for attaining higher functions. Enabled by the apprehending light that pervades all knowable things, the rational soul acquires knowledge at first through sense-perception, in an affective movement that makes impressions transit from sense-organs to the heart, and from there to the brain. It is at this level that they are acquired by *mutakhayyila*, the faculty of imagination. Imagination is conceptualised as an intermediate individual faculty that links sense-percepts and intellectual apprehension by the means of those images to be found in the *mundus imaginalis*. It absolves two functions: “on the one hand, it ‘spiritualizes’ corporeal things that are perceived by the senses and stored in memory. On the other, it ‘corporealizes’ the spiritual things known in the heart by giving them shape and form” (Chittick 1994: 72). Human imagination is directly dependent from the two other domains of imagination, as it is the faculty through which divine imagination, the theophanic acts of creation that starts at the divine level and transit through the world of imagination, is completed.

An effective example comes from dreams, assumed by Ibn ‘Arabi as quintessentially *imaginal*. Dreams are in fact pure *khayal*, pure imagination, inasmuch as they encompass the vision of a domain that oscillates between the fully spiritual and the phenomenal worlds. They are of two types: on the one hand, there are those dreams in which what experienced during the daily life is re-presented to our soul after being creatively recomposed by imagination; on the other, we have those dream-visions in which metaphysical contents communicated by Universal Soul are re-elaborated by our imagination for being presented to the rational soul in symbolic forms. What is perceived – God, angels or spirits, and human beings, embodied through imagination within the *alam al-mithal* – can take “any form whatsoever, with the sole

qualification that the form must be sensory, like any imaginal phenomenon” (89). Alongside dreams, conceived as involuntary imagination, Ibn ‘Arabi speaks of voluntary acts of imagination. Drawing on the Peripatetic tradition, he distinguishes between recollecting retained memories (*al-qumwa al-hafiza*) and compositive imagination (*al-qumwa al-musammira*), that as it has been said is the capacity of creatively re-assembling sensory data. What happens is the paradoxical situation in which the forms that God can give shape to through the *khayal mutlaq* are infinite in number, but can be manifested only according to the limited possibilities provided by the creatural realm, the world of the bodies and of sense-perception. Ibn ‘Arabi stresses that the *mundus imaginalis* regulates our compositive imaginative faculty by providing a

“... code, whose content is made up of the cosmic realities, ... necessary to prevent the human imagination from degenerating into a kind of fantasy ... With regard to its elementary components whatever is composed in man’s imagination necessarily has corresponding archetypes, for human imagination cannot escape the world of archetypes, which Ibn ‘Arabi says contains the essences of all possible things” (Akkach 1997: 107).

What we see through imagination can be deceptive, and only *shayks* are safe from misjudging their appearance; the role of *taw’il* techniques and wisdom is to make the perceiver able to reduce the ambiguity of the perceived forms by reconducting the visionary experience to the archetypal codification.

Within Ibn ‘Arabi’s theosophy, the human faculty of imagination comprises by itself a correspondence to the *mundus imaginalis* actualized at the level of the soul. It is *the* faculty that bridges the domain of knowledge and the knowledge of the creator. In virtue of imagination, all oppositions, *zahir* and *batin*, intellect and intelligible, knower and known, are harmonically resolved within *wujud*; the unity of existence as it is mediated by the flowing of images and of imagination contains all these moments and dualities as postulation of the Divine Essence without being reduced to them: “since the divine essence is the knower, the known and the knowing, there exists complete unity of the subject, the object and the function that establishes a relationship between them” (Landau 2008: 29).

To conclude, the aim of Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy is to pave the path through which one may achieve an indissoluble union with the divine. This can be done by the means of a faculty shared between the creator and the creatural, a common way of both manifesting and perceiving the disclosing of divine epiphanies: not disembodied intellection, not sense-perception, but imagination. Generally, for the gnostics the method through which such a union can be attained is that of ‘annihilation’ (*fana*), the act of ceasing to exist individually by muting one’s senses – through the “passing away of everything phenomenal, that is, everything other than God” (Landau 2008: 54). Nevertheless, it is crucial to mention that, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, *fana* is not a method for actualizing the union with the divine but to achieve full awareness of

an already persistent and unescapable spiritual unity, for “our existence from the beginning belonged to God, that we had no existence to start with which could cease to be” (Nasr 1997: 114).

As there is not, and never has been, any sort of separation between God and creatures, unity cannot be attained; it is nevertheless the act through which we become aware of a relationship that has always already been subsistent. Annihilation is not anymore the ceasing of the senses and of the phenomenal, but the capability of attuning these to the contemplation of the non immediately manifest. Imagination allows us to do so, precisely because it is itself a trace of the immaterial within the materiality of the receptacles and of the sense-organs: “God is present in man, and man is immersed in God. Envisaged in the first mode, union implies that God becomes the Subject who ‘sees’ through the eyes of man and ‘hears’ through his ‘ears. In the second mode, man is plunged in God so that he ‘sees’ through God and ‘hears’ through Him” (Nasr 1997: 115). It must be stressed that Ibn ‘Arabi does not suggest neither any sort of incarnation of God in man, *hulul*, nor their utter identification, *ittihad*. Again, what is realised is the full awareness that man and God are always and inherently one. True worship cannot be restrained to the exoteric and the ritual, to the verbal invocation of a divine intervention within the realm of the world of bodies. On the contrary, it must be disclosed through the sphere of the imaginal in “contemplating God lovingly in all His aspects – from the most spiritual to the most material, in short, in everything that exists, including the contemplator himself” (Landau 2008: 64).

5. Conclusions: imagination, postsecular geography, and the quest for pluralism

This chapter has reviewed the ways in which imagination has been conveyed by various Aristotelian and Post-Avicennan thinkers, from Greece to Andalusia and Persia. It has been highlighted how, after the germinal formulation proposed by the Stagiran philosopher, imagination has been endowed by the capacity of positively responding to the paradox of the religious, which is represented by the tension between *batin* and *ẓahir*, *ghayb* and *shahada*, invisibility and visibility, materiality and immateriality, transcendence and immanence. Felt by the religious person as the eruption of an otherworldly presence within the everyday world, religion is conceived as something exceeding the spectrum of sense-perception and disembodied intellection. The Islamic philosophers under inspection have referred to imagination as the capacity of making sense of invisible presences arising in the soul and in the environment, and specifically of the disclosing of divine epiphanies, exactly for it constitutes the space in-between senses and thought, between the materiality of this world and the ostensive immateriality of a world yet to be seen.

How is it possible for geographical knowledge to conceive the level of reality of divine self-manifestations if these are essentially immaterial, ostensible to some but completely inaccessible to others? As it has been shown in the previous chapter, geography of religion has hardly addressed this question, but rather

limited its focus to the outward dimension of religion. When it tries to investigate the invisible, it does so by evaluating how sensual dispositions are affected by intangible forces yet felt as present – and then, once again, by stating that religion is not pertinent to the geographical discourse if not objectified within the world of the bodies. The reasons of this disciplinary shortfall have to be found in the history of the discipline of human geography itself.

Modern human geography has extensively defined its vocation as the study of the world, and consequentially our being in the world, as it is immediately manifest to sense-perception. For long time, epistemic primacy has been accorded to the faculty of vision and to the act of seeing; according to this angle, space matters insofar as it is *visible*. Doing geography has been canonically framed as the study of place by the means of observation, while more critical attempts have been concerned with the ways in which this is actualised and enacted, that is, the ways in which we see things and perceive them in reason of our acts of seeing. As many lamented the ocular-centrism of the discipline, more recent geographies have tried to contest such a primacy and to argue for a deconstructive approach to vision and to its factual objectivity. To see, for post-modern human geography, is a complex practice to be caught in its perpetual interweaving with dynamics of power and with subjectivity.

Two theoretical shifts have tried in the last decades to dispute modern geography's ocular-centrism. The first is brought by to the so-called new cultural geography of the '80s and '90s. This school maintains for a critical approach to vision, trying to unveil how to perceive the world can be deceived by the very acts of representing and building the field of visibility itself. In other words, it focuses on the ways through which power orientates our perception and knowledge of the world by structuring the order of the sensible. Another branch, instead, argues for a visceral approach to geography, by re-positing the sensing body as the very centre of our ways of being in the world. This latter approach is commonly defined as non-representational in reason of its specific focus on a performative, rather than semiotic and constructivist, understanding of the making of space and place. While new cultural geography has reflected on how our gaze is veiled by social constructions addressing our capacity to vision, NRT openly refuses the primacy of the visual, arguing for a synaesthetic and affective epistemology. In other words, while the first denies that vision can offer direct access to the real, arguing that our vision needs to be cleaned by the veils that are constantly in the process of being crafted by society, the second upholds that we can access the world only by putting society in brackets, for contemplating our senses as they perform life unfolding itself as bare life. While the former evolves from a metaphysics of the context, the latter is instead grounded on materialist, monist and immanentistic premises.

My aim here is to argue for a third approach. Such an approach tries to search for an interstice in between the two positions: it tries to discuss vision and the power of symbolic representation without being

constricted on a theologically agnostic metaphysics of the context; it emphasises the role of senses, without advancing the same ontological rebuttal of transcendence as NRT. This approach is moulded on imagination, thought as the intermediate noetic faculty that interlinks the manifest and the hidden, the *batin* and *zahir* of every phenomenon. Imagination can hardly be considered as a new concept within human geography. Rather than for its absolute novelty, what I argue is instead for its capacity to catch the inner unity of the perpetual self-disclosing of the world and its grasp through sense-perception and/or rational thought. Said differently, human geography can benefit from rediscovering imagination because it allows us to individuate a middle ground between the manifestation of the living world and our relationship with it, being it sensual or cognitive. This would imply that we need to finally release imagination out of the narrow boundaries in which modern thought has constrained it – by designating it, on the one side, as a form of fantasy, and on the other, as an inescapable social construction. Differently from Chiara Bottici (2014), I do not think that we need to deontologize Henry Corbin’s imagination in order for it to be able responding to the political challenges of a secular world. Instead, I contend that we need to proceed desecularizing politics, while concomitantly pluralizing them precisely through desecularised, and then decolonial, imagination. A similar agenda is pursued by a postcolonial theorist such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000). For him, the attempt of pluralizing imagination is coextensive to that of decolonizing our epistemic fields: in his words, “to breathe heterogeneity into the word “imagination” ... is to allow for the possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular” (149). Nonetheless, in his work this move is hardly further pursued. To give attention to the esoteric approaches of Islamic philosophy does not imply to subscribe such its theological agenda: by restoring the esoteric approach to *nous poietikos* in modern geographical knowledge, my aim is instead that of finding in imagination a theoretical device capable of thinking religious diversity. The aim of this attempt is not to invest theory with confessional metaphysics, but to make it not hostile to religious understandings of the living world, and to assume these as epistemic *possibilities*. My argument is also cognate to Walter Mignolo’s decolonial aesthetics (2000): the point I have made in this chapter is that such an enterprise, rather than on perception, should be executed on the field of imagination.

It has been shown that the conceptualization of imagination drawn by Aristotle’s theory of mind has been paramount for the development of both rational philosophy and mysticism. Conceived as the two-faceted capacity of one to recall images of past sense-percepts and of images themselves to emerge within the mind, imagination is thought as a pivotal device for life to be propagated. Imagination grounds comprehension and, through desire, primes action. If we think, Aristotle repeatedly says, we think only through images and imagination. It is so because, being light themselves, the images conveyed by sense-percepts and re-presented by imagination have the capacity of illuminating the setting of our life. Through the notion of *nous poietikos*, to many Aristotle seems to suggest an ontological continuity between our

intellect and metaphysics – a theoretical possibility that has been largely overlooked by modern thought for only recently being rediscovered (Diamond 2015; Caston 1999).

This continuity has been instead largely explored by early Islamic philosophy. Avicenna's angelology, torn away by Averroes' rationalism and muted by Thomas Aquinas, has the precise role of unifying psychology and cosmology, the perpetual urge for creation and the ways in which creatures observe an ever-changing cosmos through the disclosing of their own soul. The outcome of the debate around *nous poietikos* symbolizes a fragmentation between Western and Oriental philosophy. For what regards the former, Descartes scrapped imagination of any metaphysic capacity, while contextually diminishing its role in cognition. After Descartes, "imagination is an aspect of mental life subordinated to understanding, at worst it is in essence the power of the evil genius that devotes all of its efforts to deceiving us" (Sepper 1989: 380). Imagination is deteriorated in fancy, the creative production of the unreal.

In post-Avicennan philosophy, largely neglected outside the Muslim world, Aristotle's mystical read is instead radicalized. Here imagination is crucial for perception, theoretical reason, and metaphysics. Both *ishraqi* school of Suhrawardi's and, even more significantly, Ibn 'Arabi have vehemently ascribed an ontological role to imagination. Imagination is in their philosophy conceived as the unification of two concomitant urges: the epiphanic self-disclosure of creation within the creatural (*khayal mutlaq*) and the creatural self-knowledge of the cosmos through the imagining of epiphanies (*khayal muttasil*). Conceived as such, imagination is nothing but geography: the disclosing of the world through a myriad loci of manifestation. In Islamic philosophy such a geography happens across three worlds: *alam al-ghayb*, the world of pure intelligibles, of the unseen and unknown; *alam al-shahada*, the world of bodies, of the visible and knowable; and *alam al-mithal*, the world of imagination, the *barzakh* in which the transition between the higher and lower worlds is set – the realm in which spirits are corporealized and bodies spiritualized. The concept of *alam al-mithal* indicates the intermediate position of imagination between the *batin* and *zahir*, transcending the dualism of material and immaterial, of visibility and invisibility.

One last point has to be made. Islamic philosophy has conceptualised imagination as an integral part of a unified ontological model based on revealed truth. Within this model, as said, cosmology is utterly inseparable from psychology, morals from physiology, geography from epistemology, and so forth. Henry Corbin, whose work strongly contributed to the rediscovering of Islamic theories on imagination across the Western world, has often reminded how such a concept cannot be easily extrapolated from the ontological system to which it is encapsulated. It cannot be secularized, and cannot be used for any other use beyond theophanic imagination. Nonetheless, for rediscovering the importance of this theory of imagination for postsecular thinking one does not need to subscribe to Sufism. There is one reason for this being the case.

As Corbin himself has consistently illustrated, similar theories of imagination are shared by other traditions in virtue of authors such as Bohme, Paracelsus, Meister Eckhart, and so forth. Rather than for establishing a common ground between incommensurable theologies, in the philosophical project of Corbin the function of imagination is that of countering the objectivist epistemology of secularity by demonstrating that it constitutes nothing but an interruption in the wider history of non-secular world's philosophies. At the same time, imagination serves him to prove that dogmatic religion is itself a form of secularization of true religion, which is the apophatic coming together of the exoteric with the esoteric. Imagination serves this aim by indicating a path to ontology that transcends the exoteric and points straight at the heart of creation. If we cannot know the divine but through its self-manifestation in imaginative forms, in the smooth journey from *kbayal mutlaq* to *kbayal muttasil* and back, the ways we can discursively theorise its reality cannot be but diverse and wide. Said differently, we have different religions exactly because we can access to the inaccessible only through the accessible, whose reading is contingent, it can be misleading and cannot by any extent be univocal. To pluralize imagination, then, ultimately corresponds to provide a philosophy for thinking religious diversity.

In his *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (1981) Henry Corbin illustrates this point through three diagrams sketched by the Sufi philosopher and Ibn 'Arabi follower Hayder Amoli. A first diagram represents the well-known symbolism of the mirrors: a central flame, isolated and unreachable, is reflected by a plurality of mirrors, that form its loci of manifestation. The principle of *wahdat al-wujud* implies that, when we contemplate the flame reflected within one of the mirrors, we see nothing but being itself as it is hypostatized in the surface of *mazhar*. What is required is a wider vision, capable of capturing the overarching unity of the different *imaginal* forms as nothing but reflections of the central flame. The second diagram is that of the Divine Names, the attributal manifestation of the divinity, and follows the same organization as the first. As every manifestation represents a specific disclosure of *wujud*, every *mazhar* manifests a different portion of the same unity, a different angle of the same whole. The third is that of religions. Once again, the centre is constituted by an undisclosed reality mirrored in a plurality of cells, in which all the known religions are represented. The key for understanding this diagram, Corbin stresses, is that we do not need to move from a cell to the other, to be converted, but rather to be able to move from any cell to the centre. To reach the centre means to be able understanding the truthfulness of every cell. From this angle, diversity of belief is intended as an inescapable condition of our being in the world:

“Each human individual represents a unique possibility of expression possessed by nondelimited *wujud*. In the same way, each individual's knowledge represents a unique understanding of *wujud*, an understanding that is determined by *wujud's* self-disclosure. Hence, beliefs are determined by the ontological possibilities that make up the individual. Just as each person is a unique existent, so also each is a unique knower. Just as each person's

existence represents a unique knot tied in nondelimited Reality, a unique word articulated within the Breath of the All-merciful, so also each person's belief represents a unique configuration of nondelimited Awareness" (Chittick 1994: 141).

Accordingly, the highest condition of human perfection is instituted by the capacity for understanding the truthfulness of every belief. This does not mean that every form of religiosity is capable of leading to the same knowledge as others. It does not imply that every path is paved in the same way as another, but rather that these all lead to the same destination. What is needed is to "recognize the truth of every belief and understand that every tying, every knotting, every restriction, is a delimitation of nondelimited *wujud*" (152).

Ibn 'Arabi's tradition circumscribes the validity of this to revealed religions, and so do Henry Corbin and his followers. The challenge for postsecular thought is, nonetheless, being able of including within apophatic pluralism myriad intermingling positions across the nova effect of religious diversity – and then, from orthodoxies to nonreligious ways of thinking and being in the world. My point is that human geography must respond to the postsecular call for contrasting fundamentalism and exceeding the mere toleration of difference precisely by pluralizing its epistemology. By putting secular human geography and theology in dialogue, my aim is not to demonstrate that every form of pluralism is inescapably of confessionalist nature. On the contrary, it is to open up possibilities for the cohabitation of different aesthesis and different knowledges, of religious or nonreligious fancy. My argument is that this can be done by giving prominence to a geographical theory centred on imagination that admits the epistemic openness of *nous poietikos*.

IV

Reimagining the Mosque: Postsecular Planning and Participatory Arts

“Just as a vagrant accused of stealing a carrot from a field stands before a comfortably seated judge who keeps up an elegant flow of queries, comments and witticisms while the accused is unable to stammer a word, so truth stands before an intelligence which is concerned with the elegant manipulation of opinions” (Weil 2005: 88).

“Man loves God, says Ibn ‘Arabi, because God is beautiful ... God, on the other hand, loves His creatures – man and all creation – because these, too, are beautiful. Whence do they derive beauty? Clearly, it is God’s beauty that is the source of every kind of beauty, whether spiritual, intellectual or physical ... God loves it because in the beauty of created forms His own ‘form-less’ beauty, in fact His very being, is reflected ... Without the water the stars could not contemplate their own beauty” (Landau 2008: 65-66).

1. Introduction

On 21 October 2016 more than two thousand Roman residents, led by Shaykh Mizanur Rahman, began practicing *salāt al-jumu‘ah*, the Friday congregational prayer (fig. 1). They faced the Colosseum². Organized by Rome’s Bangladeshi association Dhuumcatu and partnered by the Coordinamento Associazioni Islamiche del Lazio (CAIL), the collective prayer was the peak of a protest that lasted for weeks. Five different public demonstrations were also set from the peripheral neighbourhood of Centocelle towards the very centre of Rome, the Piazza Vittorio. During the months of September and October 2016, in fact, Rome’s authorities, designating them as unauthorized, upheld the closure of eleven Islamic prayer halls operating across the city. The series of closures was ostensibly motivated by the infringement of local building regulations in the architectural modifications made by Muslims associations to their facilities, which were, in most cases, former garages or shops.

A paradox, as stressed by the protest organizers, was recognised by the fact that, by 2016, there were still no specific regulations for what concerned Islamic places of worship on either a national or local level. Islam is not officially recognized by the Italian state. Prayer halls are usually coded as associative spaces. Planning responsibility is, as such, delegated to local authorities and, in most of the cases, such as that of

² News of 21 October 2016: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/muslims-stage-protest-prayers-rome-colosseum-161021165608295.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-mosques/muslims-pray-at-colosseum-protesting-against-rome-mosque-closures-idUSKCN12L2AU>



Figure 1 - Rome, Colosseum - Photo by Ulixes Pictures



Figure 2 - Rome, Piazza dei Martiri - Photo by Ulixes Pictures

Rome, completely evaded. According to the demonstrators, the motivations for the closures were purely pretextual: without a procedure to follow in virtue of which being secured, such was their claim, every mosque is unauthorized and can be suddenly closed due to being illegal. In other words, for enjoying the constitutional right of religious freedom, they maintain, Muslims would be paradoxically forced to be in contrast with current planning regulations, for planning regulations neglect their own specific requirements. Dhuumcatu and CAIL's position about the illegitimacy of these closures has more recently found confirmation in the decision of the Regional Administrative Tribunal, which disposed the reopening of all these spaces. The case, however, is far from being closed.

The tensions testified in Rome are far from unique. On the contrary, during the last two decades conflicts over Islamic spaces and mosques have spread to the point of constituting one of the most crucial factors of the Italian political debate (Saint-Blancat 2016). With a rapidly expanding population of more than 2 million Muslims, 43% of whom are now Italian citizens (Ciocca 2018), the number of official mosques characterized by specific architectural features and officially recognised as such has remained remarkably low. Only six mosques are, in fact, present today throughout the whole national territory: a small centre in Milan's suburbs, in Segrate, opened in 1994; the monumental Grande Moschea di Roma, inaugurated in 1995; a former theatre in Catania, refurbished in 2011; the purpose-built mosque of Ravenna, 2013; the Islamic centre in Colle Val D'Elsa, Tuscany, built in 2014; and the modernist mosque of Forlì, completed in 2017. Alongside these, there is an ever-growing number of *musallayat*, temporary prayer halls, estimated at around 1.200.

As dramatically illustrated by the work of the photographer Niccolò Degiorgis (2015), most of these *musallayat* sites are located in the extreme peripheries or hidden in anonymous buildings, including a plethora of former shops and commercial facilities, common rooms and apartments, garages and car parks, sport halls, and abandoned warehouses. The architectural quality of these makeshift places of worship is often extremely low. Alongside the lack of consistent funding, the lack of exterior symbolic denotations is due to the temporary nature of these spaces which are caused by adverse planning regulations. With donations being collected for the eventual building of a permanent mosque, the interiors of *musallayat* are usually furnished with only few essential liturgical elements – a carpet, a wooden *mihrab*, a tap and a sink used for ablution. Since they are extant buildings whose formal refurbishment is restricted by planning codes, the orientation to Mecca, *Qibla*, is, in most of the cases, indicated by tape lines applied over the carpet. Often there is no ventilation and only artificial illumination. Since these informal places are hardly sufficient to the demand, frequently Muslims gather and pray upon the pavements around their *musalla*. Crowding is particularly intense during Ramadan; for these occasions, urban administrations have, in a few certain contexts, disposed the temporary use of some public facilities, such as schools or sport halls, for accommodating the celebration of *iftar*.

The proliferation of *musallayat*, depicted as *moschee abusive*, ‘unauthorized mosques’, has been the object of wide contestation across Italy. Frequently fuelled by media coverage, this contestation is conducted by citizen partnerships while often supported and channelled by conservative political parties, from established parties such as Lega Nord (Northern League) and Fratelli d’Italia, to neo-fascist movements such as Forza Nuova and Casa Pound. The spreading of anti-mosque protests has been so wide-ranging that to map its boundaries is almost impossible. Conflictual episodes have been registered throughout the whole country. Alongside the presence of informal prayer halls, protest has invested virtually every planning negotiation between Muslim groups and civic authorities, being it for the regularization of a prayer hall, or for the proposed edification of a new mosque. The outcome of these political tensions is that very often the public administration seems reluctant to positively address Muslim groups’ demands (Ambrosini 2013). A paradigmatic case has been that of Lodi (Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg 2005), in which the political pressures initiated by a coalition between the Northern League, a number of neighbourhood associations, and Catholic groups have contributed to the failure of the initiative. Again, to list all the episodes in which this type of conflict has erupted would be extremely challenging. Two exemplary cases can be found in Milan (Chiodelli 2015) and Bologna (Conti 2016), where both right-wing and left-wing political administrations have failed to maintain the promises of guaranteeing adequate religious space to Muslim communities. In sum, repressive initiatives such as the closure of informal spaces for worship are not supported either by a set of regulations, or by a manifest political will to offer pragmatic planning directions to Muslims communities and to overcome administrative difficulties for their applications to be successful (Chiodelli and Moroni 2017).

Far from being circumscribed to Italy, the conflict over mosques and Islamic spaces represents a central concern within the European urban polity (Allievi 2009; 2010; Green 2011). Tense exchanges around existing or proposed Islamic spaces have been extensively studied, for example, in France (Cesari 2005; Maussen 2007), Germany (Becker 2017; Kuppinger 2014), Spain (Astor 2016; Moreras 2010; Diez de Velasco 2010; Rogozen-Soltar 2012), Belgium (Torrekens 2013), Greece (Sakellariou 2011; Kostopoulou 2016), Poland (Narkowicz and Pedziwiatr 2017), Sweden (Roald 2013), the Netherlands (Landman and Wessels 2005; Roose 2009), Switzerland (Mayer 2011; Cheng 2015; Pratt 2016), and the United Kingdom (Gale 2005; Gale and Naylor 2002; Baker 2017; Dwyer 2015; Nilsson DeHanas and Pieri 2011). In the UK, during 2017 alone, conflicts emerged in London, Manchester, Bristol, Bolton, Cambridge, Blackburn, Bradford, and Gillingham.

An emerging specialist literature shows some recurrent dynamics and problems. First, visibility is the most frequent reason adduced for contestation, discursively and politically. Purpose-built or adapted mosques are often disputed for the aesthetic impact they might have on the built environment (Göle 2016; Ruez 2012). Often planning applications are objected, amended, or rejected in reference to specific

design elements, commonly for the presence or the height of the minaret, or, more generically, for the 'oriental' forms not in keeping with the urban landscape (Verkaaik 2011). Second, negotiations are profoundly affected by emergent anti-mosque lobbies (Betz and Meret 2009). Scholars note that planning procedures are frequently impacted during their deliberative course by the insurgence of political mobilizations. Often a number of formal contestations around planning technicalities are officially substantiated only after political controversies have publicly emerged. At the same time, Muslim communities are frequently reluctant to make their applications context-specific, with repeated frictions invested in sizing and design issues; many projects are magniloquent and over-dimensioned, while both the integration in the area and the financial feasibility of the plan are uncertain. Moreover, often the group proposing a planning application is not recognized as representative by the same local Muslim community it claims to speak for.

How can conflicts be addressed, mitigated, and solved? What strategies can be used by Muslim communities for overcoming spatial marginalization and pursuing an often neglected constitutional right? What should planners and administrators do? Does critical geography play a role in this thinking? Indeed, can a postsecular approach based on apophatic pluralism and creative imagination help to rethink and ameliorate planning practices?

This chapter presents the experience and rationale of two series of public events I planned, organized, and led in two distinct occasions: in Bologna, during February and March 2016, and in Rome, during May 2017. Named *Rethinking the Mosque: Sacred Space and the City*, these practice-as-research projects aspired to forge a device for conflict resolution and management for the establishment of mosques centred on the notion of creative imagination. Through this, my research as praxis aimed to develop new approaches to interreligious dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims by co-creating, with the project partners and events participants, new knowledges and new political strategies to be deployed in public debate. Thought in the form of public workshops, the project made use of a combination of participatory techniques belonging to social sciences and participatory arts, with a specific attention to traditional Islamic sacred arts – Islamic architecture, *islami* composition and plastic arts, and poetry. These activities were conducted with a number of collaborators and Muslim artists based in the UK, Rome, and Bologna, such as Ayesha Gamiet, Shaheen Kasmani, and Shagufta K Iqbal. The role of these activities was to disclose the significance of beauty in Islamic theology, and, through that, solicit a synesthetic experience with the everyday sacred. It is only through the mobilization of new sense-percepts and *phantasmata*, I argue, that the entanglement of opinions in discursive reason can be renegotiated, and through this, that anti-religious attitudes and Islamophobia might be challenged. The use of traditional Islamic sacred arts is motivated by three reasons. First, it aims at constituting a non-verbal common language between participants with different backgrounds and different levels of linguistic proficiency, stimulating curiosity

and facilitating participation. Second, it helps to disclose the relationship between sense perception and the everyday sacred, the sayable and the unsayable. Third, it wants to decolonize beauty and aesthetics, and altogether to revert established power relations and epistemic hierarchies between Muslims and non-Muslims within a non-Muslim context. In sum, by placing Islamic theology at the centre of participatory processes of visioning, the goal for the workshop was to suggest the realignment of the axis Occident-Orient, from horizontal to vertical: as in Avicenna and Suhrawardi, the Orient would stop corresponding to a place in the map, for instead becoming an aspiration to illumination, knowledge, and spirituality – an aspiration that can be fulfilled everywhere, and through an indefinite multiplicity of paths.

The chapter is organized in two sections. The first is dedicated to the workshop I directed in Bologna, named *Una moschea per Bologna?*. As a first step, I briefly provide some background about the literature and debate on urban planning, the right to the city, and participatory planning approaches. In particular, I will introduce the role of imagination and arts in decision-making processes. Without the claim of being exhaustive, this section has the function of introducing my approach and its specificity. Then, I will clarify the preliminary organizational phases of Bologna's workshop, the definition of the work plan, and its reception. The second section will discuss the workshop in Rome, *Una moschea per Roma?*. In particular, it will focus on the artistic activities, which constituted the main innovation between the workshop held in Bologna and the one in Rome. Neither of these two sections will be specific about the positions that emerged during the collective discussions and the results of the workshops: rather than the propositions and solutions elaborated by the participants for ameliorating their local contexts, I prefer to focus on the general principles of the model experimented with, and on the replicability of such approaches for other conditions and contexts. The significance of creative imagination for planning under postsecular principles will be further elaborated in the conclusions.

2. Una moschea per Bologna?

In early May 2007, the Councillor for Urban Planning in the city of Bologna, Virginio Merola, announced the first results of an ongoing negotiation between his department and the Centro Islamico Bolognese (CIB) for the erection of a Jamia Masjid, a Grand Mosque. At the time, this would have been the first within the Region of Emilia-Romagna and the third opened all over Italy. More than 50.000 square meters would have been donated by the council to the local Muslim community in exchange for an equivalent area to be used for the redevelopment of a school. The designated lot was rural land in the northern peripheries of the city, within the so called CAAB (Centro Agro-Alimentare di Bologna). The project for the forthcoming Islamic centre imagined a modernist complex of 6.000 square meters, with a praying area, a library, a space for after-school activities, a minaret, and a dome. What the City Council required, Merola declared, was the institution of a permanent committee composed by three members of the public administration and three members of the Islamic community, constantly scrutinising that the mosque

would guarantee the promotion of multi-culturalism as well as the equal treatment of women and children, and more generally monitoring “every liturgical aspect”³. The Islamic community was represented by Mohammed Daniele Parracino, an Italian convert affiliated with the Union of Islamic Communities and Organisations in Italy (UCOII).

As documented by Bartolomeo Conti (2016), all the negotiations were privately held by the municipality and the Islamic community, without any third actor being included. Significantly, not even Muslim groups other than CIB were consulted, while only few of their representatives were actively involved in the institutional conversation. Moreover, the designated area was chosen by the planning authorities before the conversation was even initiated. In reason of these factors, with potential mediators being discounted, the political debate started only after the announcement of the project. Nevertheless, this “included mainly people who were either driven by political and ideological reasons or simply wanted to express fear of having to share their land with the ‘other’” (246). As a result, the level of political conflict rose to the point that planning decisions ended up being carefully re-examined.

It was September 2007 when the Vice-President of the Senate, Roberto Calderoli, proposed a sit-in protest on the lot, in which all the participants would have brought a pig in order to desecrate the land and re-vindicate the primacy of Christianity, secularism, or at least of paganism, on the area. After these declarations and the obsessive media attention the project started receiving, the City Council publicly reconsidered the viability of the plan itself. A few months after Merola’s announcement, the City Council and the mayor Sergio Cofferati halted the project.

Three main reasons for the halt in planning were made public: the first regarded the financial and practicability of the land exchange; the second was the group’s affiliation with UCOII, whose affinity with Muslims Brotherhood was, at the time, emphasised by the local media; the third was the emerging number of NIMBY protests in the city. Nonetheless, the plan for a new mosque was not discarded, but simply suspended: what was crucial at that stage, Cofferati declared, was to listen to the voice of the citizenship and, only after that, make a well-pondered decision⁴.

After many years in which it almost entirely disappeared from the political debate, the question of Bolognese mosque emerged again only in the July of 2015. When asked by a journalist about the need for a new mosque, Virginio Merola stated that such an issue was not a priority and that any new step to ever be made in that direction would eventually be nothing but the outcome of an open conversation

³ News of the 6 May 2007: <http://temi.repubblica.it/metropoli-online/bologna-via-libera-alla-nuova-moschea/>

⁴ News of the 18 September 2007: <http://bologna.repubblica.it/dettaglio/cofferati:-la-moschea-si-fara-ma-decidendo-insieme-ai-cittadini/1369487>



Figure 3 – Bologna, Centro Islamico Via Pallavicini



Figure 4 – Bologna, Centro Islamico via Zago

between the public administration and the city as a whole⁵. At that time, Merola was entering the final year of his first mandate as the city mayor, while having been again nominated as the candidate of the

⁵ News of the 17 July 2015: <http://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/nuova-moschea-bologna-pranzo-comunita-islamica.html>

Democratic Party (PD) for the forthcoming local elections, to be held in June 2016. The Muslim population in the city was estimated to be about 30.000 people, and the area counted 13 *musallayat* (fig. 3 and 4). In place of Daniele Parracino, in 2013 the CIB nominated a new president, Yassine Lafram, a 28 year old Moroccan man who studied Political Science at the University of Bologna. With Merola's declarations, the local PD was sweeping the argument under the rug while waiting for better times to discuss the issue. During the whole electoral campaign, the only political party who mentioned the theme was the Northern League, then the PD's major electoral opponent. Since it was impossible to oppose to PD's plan for the construction of a mosque, as there was no plan whatsoever in PD's agenda, Lega's program was proposing nothing less than the closure of all the existing *musallayat* and a ban on every new mosque to be opened. The Lega Nord's Bologna proposition was modelled on a recent and similar Lombardy law of banning the building of any new mosque – even though, only few months earlier, that too was invalidated by the Italian Constitutional Court as unconstitutional (Anello 2016).

2.1 Thinking the workshop: from ethnography to practice-as-research

At the time, I was in Bologna for an ethnographic work. Even though not explicitly interrogated or even prompted about this specific topic, the question of the presence of Islam and Islamic spaces has often been spontaneously mentioned and discussed by my informants. The emerging of Islam as a new subject in the city was, in fact, considered the most remarkable transformation to have occurred in their hometown in the last decade. Sometimes this transformation was appreciated for having brought more cultural diversity in a stagnating city, or it was at least tolerated as inevitable; in other cases, it was rather assumed as too fast and too drastic.

In these cases, Islam was depicted as an obscure religion utterly incompatible with Italian society. Most of the times, even across many of those who were optimistic about the possibilities of accommodating Islam in Italian society, my informants pointed to “the way Muslims treat women” as an element to be reformed or addressed as soon as possible. References to terrorism were often related to two issues: on the one hand, the fact that “we don't know what they are saying in their sermons”; on the other, the fact that “we don't know who is behind them”. These two points, the obscurity of Arabic language and the potential connections with extremist theologies, were mirrored by the questions surrounding the building of mosques and Islamic spaces.

Even though maybe needed, the presence of *musullayat* was often assumed as socially and politically problematic, in reason of their being closed and inaccessible to the non-affiliates. When I asked my research participants whether finally building an official mosque or more mosques would contribute to mitigating or even solving these controversies, they often were hesitant. The main problems were, for them, raised by the potential location chosen for these spaces: “maybe it is their right to have a mosque, but for sure I would not like having it in the medieval centre”. When I stressed that Bologna's city centre

has already been significantly transformed in its historical architectural peculiarities by many modernist and postmodernist buildings, they often replied that this might be true, but that oriental exteriors, “all those towers, those minarets”, would have been an aggressive symbol of power to reject. The other problem was that of the potential funders: on the one hand, many thought it problematic for the taxpayer to publicly fund such buildings; on the other, many objected to the possibility for these spaces to be built with foreign capitals, especially if such aid came from countries such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar.

During these months, I elaborated on the decision to enlarge my research project, by creating a context for data collection which directly explored the themes of Islam, Islamic spaces, Islamophobia, and religious pluralism in the city. My dissatisfaction with the data gathered on these topics through my ethnographic methodology was given by the fact that, even when I was finding their replies to be uniform or scarcely reflexive, I was methodologically obliged not to prompt too much information from my informers. I was equally frustrated by both the replies they were giving me and by how the matter was posed across the political debate, by political parties and by the media. From my knowledge on the topic, there were many ways in which Islamic spaces could be produced that were left completely uncharted: many different ways of defining their siting, many different architectural styles, many different modalities of funding. In other words, what I was noticing in both the opinion expressed by the research participants and the discursive order under which the question was framed within the political debate was the lack of any reference to other geographical contexts in which certain solutions have been successfully experimented – very simply, for example, the fact that many mosques from the Islamic world do not have a minaret. The general response was that, as the inclusion of Muslims could be an extremely challenging task, there were no available options other than waiting for better times to come. In the meanwhile, the strategy was to use a repressive approach and leave everything as it is.

At the same time, I was profoundly unconvinced by the deliberative procedures used by Bologna’s administrators. I agreed with both Cofferati and Merola about the necessity for the citizenship to be consulted and actively engaged in the decision-making process; nevertheless, I was dubious about what had been done since, about the employed methodologies, or about their outcomes. The key was then to further reflect on how participation should be set for debates on planning, and to try to articulate a different approach, based on apophatic pluralism and creative imagination.

2.2 Urban planning and participation: communicative planning, visioning, and imagination

Current literature on planning theory is particularly attentive to matters of participation. Top-down approaches have been extensively objected for they often neglect the desires of the communities they represent and plan for. Planning praxis is consequently criticized for being deceptive and manipulatory (Yiftachel 1998; Flyvbjerg 1996). Besides, technocratic processes guarantee scarce public legitimacy to the decisions being made, which are extremely vulnerable to neighbourhood contestations. This is

especially the case in heated issues such as the edification of mosques. Without the cautious work of consultation that includes of a wide variety of actors, the results of private negotiations are often rejected by the public, as events in Bologna blatantly demonstrate.

One of the most successful models in opposition to top-down policy-making is that of communicative planning (Forester 1999; 2000). Inspired by Habermas' discursive ethics and directly derived from Davidoff's advocacy planning (1965), communicative planners are devoted to the principle that just democratic procedures lead to uncoerced agreement around just outcomes. This principle must be actualized through mobilizing a wide and diversified participation as an essential principle for just planning, while empowering different communities by giving them voice and allowing them to be heard. Different parties are required to engage actively in planning through open communication and intersubjective argumentative practice. The search for overlapping consensus is guaranteed by "the effort of constructing mutual understanding as the locus of reasoning activity" (Healey 1993: 240). Everyone's view should be respectfully received, for the better argument is discursively built only in cooperation with others. For some, communicative planning "is particularly relevant in multicultural milieus where historically marginalised groups could clearly benefit from attempts to promote a fair and equal hearing for diverse voices in public affairs" (Umemoto and Igarashi 2009: 40). Communicative planning would in fact avoid the epistemic dominion of the majority precisely because it guarantees that every community can be equally represented in deliberative processes for it is allowed to freely express its own opinion.

Nevertheless, many scholars have criticised communicative planning and consensus-making practices (Campbell 2006; Yiftachel and Huxley 2000; Portugali and Alfasi 2008). The strongest argument against it is, in short, that it "ignores the reality of structural inequality and hierarchies of power" (Fainstein 2010: 30). In other words, a proceduralist approach to deliberative processes overlooks that the discourses brought by different speakers within planning meetings are differently weighted and received by both the other participants and the planning technicians, as do different languages, different linguistic capabilities, and different argumentative registers. For example, the language of secular technocrats, and the often inaccessible jargon of planning professionals is assumed to be intrinsically reasonable and authoritative. What the Habermasian approach fails to recognise is that "the power of words depends on the power of speakers" (34). For authors such as Mark Purcell (2009), communicative planning constitutes a particularly desirable tool for the elites to more effectively achieve neoliberal goals. On the one hand, this is because it neglects that existing power relations might remain unaffected or even be reinforced by discursive encounters. On the other, it provides democratic legitimization by gathering consensus around decisions that might be *de facto* taken outside of the participative arena. Rather than facilitating community-based consultation and the access of the excluded to the very core of decision making, "planning provides the discipline for life in urban spaces to achieve the ends of our dominant market

logics” (Gunder 2010: 308). As summarised by Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2002: 46), “communicative planning theory fails to capture the role of power in planning. As a result, it is a theory which is weak in its capacity to help us understand what happens in the real world; and weak in serving as a basis for effective action and change”.

Habermas’ version of postsecularism, discussed in the second chapter of this work, even when applied to planning processes, reveals fundamental principles of communicative action that are particularly problematic for accommodating religious’ diversity of claims. This critique seems particularly substantial for what concerns religious minorities and Muslims. The effectiveness of Muslim community arguments in a context of communicative planning is, in fact, limited by a number of crucial factors. First, in planning activities Muslim communities enter into an environment that is often openly hostile to their claims, because of Islamophobia but more prominently because of the intrinsic anti-religious or secularist nature of planning rationality (McClymont 2015). Second, often their representatives are not native speakers: this implies that they might sometimes encounter difficulties in formulating their claims, and that these can be manipulated by more eloquent speakers; besides, linguistic proficiency can constitute a barrier to participation per se (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In an argument famously initiated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998), to give voice to minorities does not automatically preclude the risk of epistemic violence and of reproducing subalternity. How can successful participation be achieved? How can the demands of Muslims be heard and positively received?

An approach elaborated by planning theory for overcoming power, epistemic, and linguistic asymmetries in deliberative negotiations is based on the notion of visioning. In short, visioning is the practice of allowing participating actors to visualize, comment, and sketch future scenarios as a substantial part of planning (Shipley 2002). Rather than through verbal interactions as in communicative planning, visioning sustains participation with visual elicitation: according to the different techniques deployed, future scenarios are elaborated at different stages and attentively composed *with* the participants. For some, visioning must not be circumscribed to the *act* of visualizing, as in merely taking vision of and choosing between different sets of renderings produced by planning technicians according to what is discursively said in planning negotiations. Differently, visioning consists in impacting the direction of the planning activity from its very beginning, by imaginatively producing new *visions* – new *imaginaries* – of how the city can be shaped, lived, and of what new forms planning interventions should accomplish. This principle has a practical implication and a more theoretical one.

On one level, it is recommended that activities of visioning are initiated in early stages of planning, before formal negotiations are even commenced. In this case, visioning allows for the coproduction of knowledges between planners and participants, be they stakeholders or simply interested citizens (de Groot et al. 2014). Through this, visioning forms a strategy for preliminary consultation that, while

complementary to interviews, promises to transcend discursive rationality and verbal modalities of interaction. Visioning suggests that instituting an informal context in which the technical expertise and linguistic proficiency of both participants and planners are levelled promotes the active engagement of those who are less keen on being verbally proactive (Helling 1998). At the same time, it transcends the framing of planning as finalized to mere deliberation and rather underlines that the practice of visioning constitutes a strategy for creatively making or co-producing the participants, and particularly the stakeholders, more disposed to open collaboration (Askew Elkins et al. 2009). Altogether, it is a way to mitigate the polarization of political tensions and to alleviate the preoccupation for these to emerge (Gaffikin and Sterrett 2006). Said differently, visioning allows both planners and participants to explore the planning scene before socio-political tensions based on opinions formed outside of it are re-enacted and reproduced within the deliberative setting.

On a more theoretical level, visioning is a mode for introducing creative imagination in planning praxis. For authors such as Leonie Sandercock (2004; 2005), the emphasis for planning theory must not be posed in the search for new tools for visioning, but rather in stimulating the renewal of the political horizons of planning. This would be preliminary to the planning activity: what is crucial, in other words, is to shape new ways to solicit the creativity of both planners and participants, and to frame more effective forms of engagement which all together enhance the capacities empathetically employing imagination. For Davis and Hatuka (2011), the right to the city can be realized only through the ‘right to vision’. According to their view, visioning is ultimately a viable way for encouraging collective imagination and through that reshaping the public: it is then fundamental to inspire citizens to contribute to renovating the city through compositive imagination, by introducing on the scene images that are not already within the repertoire of planners and which do not pre-exist the planning activity. Visioning’s “epistemic foundation, in short, is built on the assumption that the unfettered ‘right to vision’ might help enable new ideas that in the long run lead to transformative and socially just urban outcomes” (243). Last point, visioning can constitute an attainable method for agonistic approaches to planning in that they manage conflicts in a respectful manner: participants co-create the city by sharing visions and praxes.

Balug and Vidart-Delgad (2014) argue that the best strategy to liberate imagination in contexts of urban planning is that of play. According to their research, to set play within the praxis of visioning activities helps both planners and participants renegotiate their positions for creating a common ground and a common language, beyond the verbal and the technocratic. Play, furthermore, contributes to disentangling power relations and reframing identities as shifting assemblages:

“... through play, actors step out of their everyday to inhabit possible universes where established social rules are suspended, even subverted ... Free from obligation to produce ‘useful’ and productive results, and structured by social interaction, play advances processes

of negotiation and visioning among the parties involved – especially when these have nothing at stake given their lack of power from the outset” (1029).

Many scholars have speculated on the role for artists and a wide variety of performing arts in planning. For many, artists are crucial for participation for they are capable of “making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar” (Landry 2000: 179). This process, according to Metzger (2010), produces a similar effect to Brechtian technique of estrangement. Through estrangement, in fact, participants are able to “look upon themselves and their situation with new eyes” (223). Rannila and Loivaranta (2015) suggest that drama methods and embodied storytelling can improve the capacity of participants to express difference and for a plurality of stories to emerge. Altogether, dramatic methods can improve planners’ receptivity, for they enable “seeing the ‘real’ from a distance, to critically reflect on it and to identify opportunities for change” (793).

How can these assumptions be reflected in planning under postsecular premises? How can they ameliorate managing conflict over mosques? How did they impact my project? Two more sources have been decisive in defining the lines of my intervention. The first comes from Kahera (2002), who bases his approach for the design and planning of mosques on Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of creative imagination. According to his understanding, the architect’s act of creation is not an absolute innovation, but rather the re-manifestation of images that come from other perceptive acts, other experiences of the world of bodies, and other *phantasmata*. Consequentially, with their work, the architect and the planner do not enact a creation ex nihilo, but operate instead within the margins of a commonality of parameters provided by imagination, by created existents, and by theologically activated archetypes – beauty, symmetry, and form. In this, each architect and planner is essentially “an authorized agent of creativity, as long as he or she has the potential to conceive specific forms, images, and beautiful objects” (12). The effort of producing Islamic spaces consists precisely in catching beauty within the continuity of a plurality of images – a plurality of forms self-disclosing themselves across a plurality of forms. In this sense, “each place of worship represents a perennial shift, paralleled with accustomed meaning and correspondence, and influence by various creative forces, material and intellectual” (21). To design a mosque, then, is to “confront its immediate context. In so doing, each mosque establishes its own vernacular reference through spatial repetition, cultural representation, and visual affinity” (23). Part of the context is provided by human collective agreement – not only that of the *ummah*, of the community of faith, and not only that of the *ulama*, of the sages, but that of public gathering and communal worship.

A second source of inspiration has been provided by the work of the architecture historian and artist Azra Aksamija (2015). Her *Mosque Manifesto* presents a collection of ten different artistic projects for ten different ways of conceiving the mosque, each one emergent from a different artefact. These are provocative ways of deconstructing the mosque to its basic and more fundamental elements: to the need

of a pure space for praying, to a multiplicity of symbolic forms, and to an ephemeral and embodied practice of praying. Projected by the artist herself as the result of interactive installation or participatory performative workshops, Aksamija's mosques are produced through a variety of materials, on concrete and glass or on textiles, flexible and mobile or utterly ethereal. Across these, the most interesting project is that of the wearable mosque, a full dress whose skirt can be transformed into a praying rug. In this, "the piece is inspired by the nomadic principle of transposing the qualitative characteristics of an alien place into one's own familiar context to the point that the familiar changes, effecting a moment of cultural enrichment" (151). As such, Aksamija challenges "the very notion of the monument, with its bombastic grandeur and often overtly patriarchal associations" (33). Playfully decolonial, Aksamija's work interrogates its readers and spectators on tradition and agency, on *aisthesis* and *phantasia*, dogma and becoming, and on the role of participatory art in inducing social change: "What can art actually do to counter the politics of xenophobia without being utilized solely as a vehicle for activism?" (342). Her response opens new venues for rethinking the mosque within and beyond tradition, and to challenge Islamophobia and Islamophobic rationality with imagination.

2.3 Setting the workshop

Overall, my project tried to achieve two goals. The first was to establish a new research device that aimed at creating an occasion for further exploring the relationship between religious diversity and religious pluralism, grounded theologies and imagination, and the intertwining of the unseen in the seen. I wanted to arrange a different sample from the one constituted by the three networks of families I have built for my ethnography. While my research approach for the ethnography was that of talking about religion without explicitly mentioning religion, in this context I intended instead to openly deal with a more specific set of issues. First: what spaces and what sort of transformation of the built environment are non-Muslims inclined to concede to Islamic communities in Italy? Second: how would specific Muslim communities like to territorialize their presence in the city they inhabit? Third, and finally: how do we, Muslims and non-Muslims, conceive the future of our city for what concerns religious diversity? Such an agenda was pursued on two levels. On the one hand, I wanted to create an open space for people to interact one with the other for, all together, discussing and elaborating a number of possible strategies to accommodate Islamic spaces for worship in the city. On the other, my purpose was to experiment with a novel approach to planning processes centred on imagination and performative arts rather than on discursive reason and deliberation.

The second goal was therefore to try to actively impact the public debate and to instigate a social change. The project has tried to do so in two ways: on one side, by generating a series of research results to be disseminated across the media and public administrations; on the other, and not necessarily more modestly, by impacting the ways its own participants think about Islam, about sacred space and the

mosque, and about the city. Through this the project aimed to ultimately find a way to tackle Islamophobia by affecting the perception of mosques in European contexts through being-with and creative imagination. In sum, this would have implied the need to de-essentialize Islam by de-essentializing the ways Islamic architecture is thought; to revert the language perpetrated by media, by unfolding different ways of approaching Islamic theology and everyday life; and, ultimately, to advance new ways of imagining European Islam and a postsecular city, by desecularizing planning rationality and decolonizing the urban. How?

The projects were conceived in the form of workshops. The key principle was that, during the course of a workshop, participants would have been in the condition to learn something new – something new about Islam, about their own neighbours, and about the city they inhabit. At the same time, they would have been invited to make use of new knowledge in a series of conversations with the other participants. In other words, I wanted the dialogue between participants to be informed, and not to reproduce the opinions they had before entering in the space of the workshop. The task was thus to challenge their own discursive opinions by confronting them with a number of new images. For this purpose, I required an open space in which synthesize and present a number of informative materials taken from academic literature or produced specifically for the workshops; my aim was that participants would have used these materials for directly addressing the questions being set. But, at the same time, it was required for participants to be stimulated on a synesthetic manner: they had to be sensuously moved by the scene, and surprised.

I wanted to mobilize creative imagination, for them to reflect on the emerging of Islam in the city precisely by linking this question to a more general one, about the role of the sacred in everyday life and the everyday city. For this reason, it was essential that the participants be brought to have the time to elaborate some personal reflections on the contents provided and generated during the meetings. I thought thus that it was appropriate to extend the experience of the workshop across several meetings. Eventually, this would also have left space for some complementary activities. I then decided to set up the workshop around three meetings to be held on three consecutive Sunday afternoons. It was crucial to make it accessible to a wide variety of people: those who were directly interested in better rules and better spaces for Islam, those who were supportive to Muslims' cause, and those who were against this, for whatever reason. Alongside engaged publics and key stakeholders, such as institutional actors and community groups, the workshops had then to be open to everyone: everyone needed to be invited, and everyone was called to be involved and raise their voice.

The first step for organizing the workshop, nevertheless, has been that of contacting the Muslim communities. The first personality in Bologna was Yassine Lafram, President of the CIB. After him, I tried to reach the leaders and various key members of Bologna other Islamic communities and

associations. In most of the cases, I had to visit their *musalla*. During these meetings, I clarified the aims of the workshops and my methodology; altogether, I asked for collaboration and participation. The second step was finding a location for hosting the meetings. It was required that this location would have been fully accessible and symbolically neutral – importantly, it should not have been either the site of a specific community or having a specific political connotation. I then found agreement with Ali Tanveer, President of the association Next Generation, a local community of second generation immigrants – or better, of new Italians without Italian citizenship. The offices of Next Generation were based in a co-working space called ‘Borgo22’, in the central street of Via Borgo di San Pietro. The space was provided with four big rooms on two floors, and it was well equipped to host up to 50 people. Born in Lahore, Ali himself was part of Bologna Muslims community and has been helpful in widening my network.

I then had to define a team of collaborators. The first collaborator was Luca Gullì, lecturer of Urban Planning at the University of Parma. The second was Gaia Farina, post-doc in sociology of media at the University of Padova. The third Giulia Sudano, workshop facilitator and community organizer. The fourth collaborator was Costanza Candeloro, a performative artist. The fifth and last collaborator was the video-maker Alessio Scala. Each of them brought a specific contribution to the project and supervised its setting.

The workshops pursued two tasks. The first was to provide informative materials to the participants. My goal was delivering information about Islam and Islamic spaces conveyed in a fully accessible imagery. The materials produced by researchers, taken from the literature or through fieldwork, were thus synthesized and creatively presented with the support of Costanza, the artist, in order to stimulate participants’ curiosity, new knowledge, and their active engagement.

As a first step, I wanted to clarify what a mosque was for the Islamic tradition. This task has been pursued with the elaboration of a series of ten banners:

1. The mosque, *masjid*, is any consecrated place for practicing *salāt*: a Sunni practices *salāt* five times a day, while some Shi’a three times a day.
2. Islamic tradition distinguishes between *masjid* and *musalla*, or *jamāt kbāna*: while *musalla* is a temporary prayer hall, the *masjid* is permanent.
3. The formal characteristics of *masjid* are not defined by the Sunnah, neither by the Qur’an nor by Hadiths; the only requirement is for it to be clean.
4. The first *masjid* has been Mohammed’s home, that has been later used as a model for the edification of the mosque of Kufa, 638.
5. In Islamic architecture, there are a number of recurrent liturgical elements: the *mihrah*, a niche indicating the direction of the Mecca; the *minbar*, a wooden pulpit; and the ablution

area.

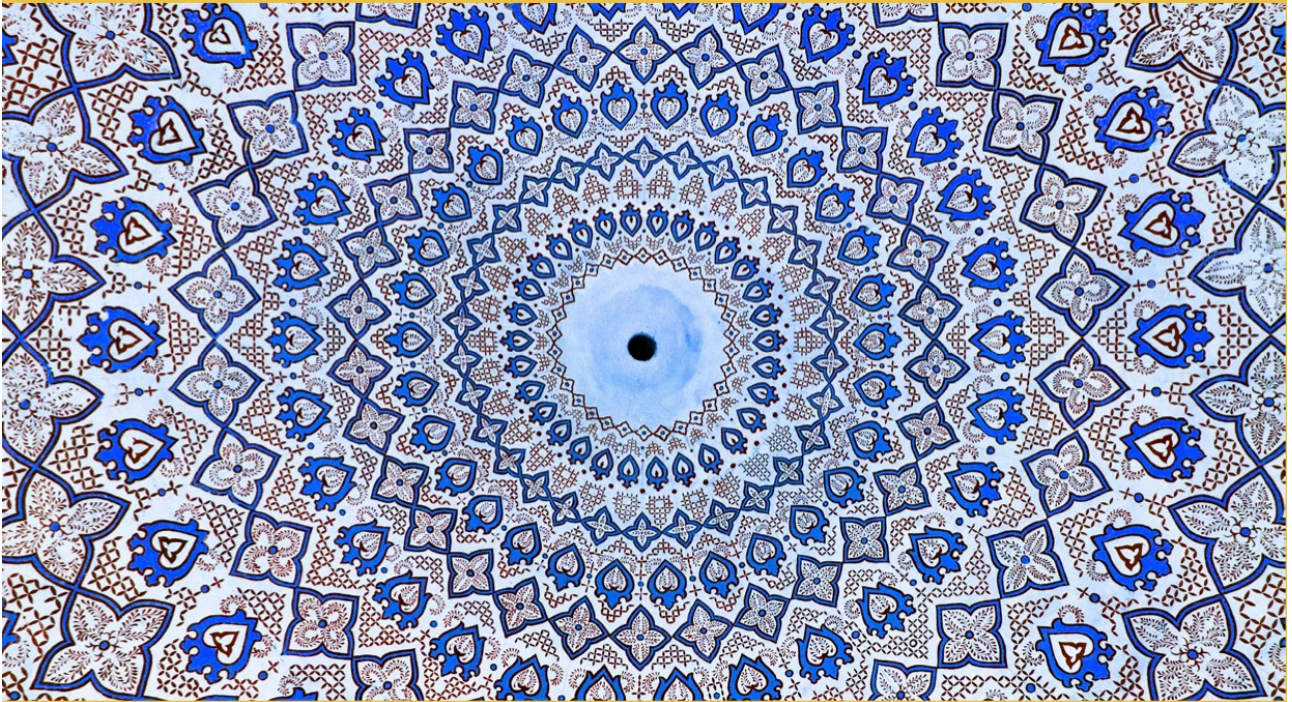
6. Other architectural elements do not have any ceremonial function: the courtyard, the porticos, the minaret, the dome.
7. These elements are not mandatory – certain mosques exhibit them all, others only few.
8. Islamic architecture is heterogeneous and mirrors the geographical distribution of Islam.
9. There are some predominant typologies, which spread from their original context for being hybridized: the hypostyle mosque, diffused in the Arab world and in Spain (700 A.C.); the four-iwan mosque, Persian (1100 A.C.); the centrally-planned mosque, originally from Turkey (1300 A.C.).
10. Nonetheless, is it correct to assume Islamic architecture as unchallengeable? Can European Islamic architecture exist? And under which forms?

The content of some of these banners was clarified and expanded by other banners, that used photographs and maps. The logical progression of these, as emphasised by the questions posed in the tenth banner, was introducing to the second set of informative materials.

These were of two kinds. On the one hand, each of the 13 *musallayat* of Bologna were photographed and mapped. On the other, I gathered a number of photographs of mosques built in the last two decades across non-Islamic Europe – UK, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Spain, Switzerland. Most of these pictures were shot by myself, others by colleagues or friends, and a minority of these were instead collected from the Internet. Alongside these photographs, I also prepared a number of edited videos: in those videos, Islamic spaces from Bologna and other European contexts were shown, as much as possible, as they can appear to a pedestrian. Footages were in fact taken from the pavements, and the task was to simply provide a visual illustration of the relationships the mosque's architecture enact with the built environment and city life. Two elements were emphasised. On the one hand, the wide diversity of styles and the combination of Islamic and non-Islamic components: I wanted to explicitly show how different architectures differently dialogue with the contexts in which they were located, differently reflecting their own specificity. Conversely, I wanted to underscore that 'oriental' design was only one of the possible forms in which European mosques are built. On the other hand, these materials exemplified how a mosque might impact the aesthetic of a neighbourhood and everyday life; I wanted to present how Islamic spaces do not necessarily produce an aesthetic disruption in the built environment, do not necessarily belong to deprived areas, and do not necessarily negatively impact the quality of life of the inhabitants of the areas in which they are set. The preparation of these consisted in a series of visits to these spaces, both in Bologna and outside Bologna; overall, it was completed on a time-span of five months. This activity has led to the production of a database and of a series of maps.

Una moschea per Bologna?

Immaginare e discutere la città pluralista



laboratorio di urbanistica partecipata

domenica 21, 28 febbraio
6 marzo 2016
ore 16 - 18

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 Una moschea per Bologna?

BORGO 
DIGITAL & SOCIAL INNOVATION - COWORKING

 University of
BRISTOL

Figure 5 – Poster for *Una moschea per Bologna?*

The second task of the workshop was that every participant would have autonomously made active use of the contents provided. Along with my collaborators, a number of group activities were planned. For this purpose, the workshop made use of a mix of techniques for public engagement and deliberation such as focus groups and Open Space Technology (OST). The general structure of the workshop was that of a bottleneck, through which slowly move from the more general to the specific. Practically, this meant that the activities would have started with broad-spectrum considerations about Islamic spaces to the elaboration and group discussion of specific proposition for the context of Bologna. The binding agent was a recurring question being posed: what is the sacred, and what is a sacred space? What was crucial was to balance group and individual activities, to carefully build the groups and to facilitate the activities in order for everyone to be actively involve. The mix combined verbal and non-verbal activities. While in the case of the workshop in Bologna this consisted mostly in map drawing, this second element has been further developed and sensibly improved in the workshop taken in Rome.

The accomplishment of the workshop required an effective communication plan. The first task was defining a title. It was crucial to highlight that the workshop was neither finalised to produce a plan nor to provide a definite reply to the spatial demands of Muslim groups. The scope of the meeting was not, said differently, to project a mosque, and not even policy-making. Even though speculative, it was not a conference and not a symposium. I wanted then to make clear that it was instead an occasion for the citizenship to finally intervene and contribute to the shaping of the debate and, eventually, to produce contents for impacting policy-making on a later stage. Participants were, in fact, called to directly respond, all together, to the questions that from early 2000 have been recurrently posed to the city administrators and presented countless times in the news headlines. The Italian title of the project needed then to be direct and provocative. I decided for *Una moschea per Bologna?*, whose literal meaning is ‘A new mosque in Bologna?’. This title subtly implies the layering of three different meanings. The first was defined by the interrogative mark; in this sense, the title was asking to the participants whether the city of Bologna needs new spaces for Islam or not. The second meaning, *Una*, ‘a’ mosque but also ‘one’ mosque, was posing the question whether a single big mosque (Jamia Masjid) should be built or rather multiple small ones forming a network. The third meaning emphasised the preposition *per*, for Bologna; here the question was whether such spaces could be beneficial to the Muslims community or to the city as a whole. The subtitle, *Laboratorio di urbanistica partecipata* (participatory planning workshop), was then clarifying the explorative character of the experience.

After the title was defined, the project team worked on a series of strategies for communication. We produced a poster and a series of flyers (fig. 5). These were posted and distributed in key locations, such as every *musallayat*, a number of community centres, public libraries, public offices, and University halls. A Facebook page was also opened. The composition and running of all these have followed a simple

rule: the language has avoided academic, planning, or political jargon; instead, it had to be evocative and poetic. More than anything, communication tried to underscore three points: first, that it is the time to pragmatically forge a strategy for addressing religious diversity; second, that we should be optimistic, that a solution can be found and will likely be found; third, that for this solution is still to be defined, everyone is called to reflect on this and to express his own point. After the Facebook page was opened, I was contacted by the newspaper *Repubblica* and by the radio broadcast 'Radio Popolare'. The whole 5th page of the local newspaper was dedicated to the project⁶. Not surprisingly, the project received much critical attention and has been variously contested. In particular, the Facebook page has been invested by several negative comments, which were contesting the opportunity of initiating a dialogue with the Islamic community altogether. However, as the project was designed in an inclusive manner so as to welcome a wide diversity of perspectives, the strategy for addressing these contributions was that of politely inviting their authors to express their own opinion within the context of the workshop.

2.4 Practicing the workshop: a moving workplan

The project was arranged around a core of three public meetings. Structured through a variety of contents and activities, each of these meetings aimed at both offering and co-producing along with its participants a plurality of imagines about Islam and Islamic spaces, whilst constituting a platform for informed public discussions and debate. The task stimulated participants' imaginaries on spaces for Islam in European frameworks, and outlined a number of experimental or potential strategies for building new communal spaces for Muslims.

The first step was then setting the space for the meetings. This has been thought as a synesthetic and dynamic exhibition of materials produced by me and my collaborators as well as by the participants. In other words, the space would have been challenged and open to transformations. Some of the materials have been displayed through the three meetings. These were the three articles of the Italian Constitution about religious freedom (Art. 8, 19, and 20), and five quotations:

"The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire" (Harvey 2003: 939).

"All living beliefs, all living desires and ideas, must be perpetually renewed, from generation to generation: re-thought, re-considered, re-willed, re-built, if they are to endure" (Mumford 1970:435).

"Cities have to be seen less as a series of locations on which categorical attributes are piled,

⁶ News of the 30 January 2016: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/01/30/a-bologna-manca-una-grande-moschea-ecco-perche-serveBologna05.html>

and more as forces and intensities which move around and from which, because of their constant ingestions, mergers and symbioses, the new constantly proceeds” (Amin and Thrift 2002: 91).

“The virtuous city is like the perfect and healthy body, all of whose limbs co-operate to make the life of the animal perfect and to preserve it in this state” (al-Farabi in Walzer 1985: 231-232).

“Every lived belief, every desire and lived idea must be continuously renewed from generation to generation: re-thought, reconsidered, re-built, for them to keep being alive” (Lercaro 1996: 444)⁷.

The role of these quotations, installed in a series of posters nearby the entrance, was setting the tone of the discussion: on one side, by fixing some principles about how to conceive the city; on the other, by clarifying that the workshop was not a planning meeting or decision-making, but a workshop, a *laboratory* for new ideas to be forged and tested in conversation one with the other.

The first meeting was held on Sunday the 21st of February 2016. Thirty-five people participated in the meeting. Participants were very heterogeneous, with a significant number of Muslims. Some of the participants were planners who variously collaborated with the current city council. While no members from the city council were present, various activists and politicians were there, including a Lega Nord candidate.

The aim of this first meeting was that of introducing the topic. The central question was then: how to produce spaces for religious pluralism and Islam in Bologna? Upon entry, participants were registered, and received a booklet with the overall plan of the workshop and some basic indications: first, to carefully look at the exhibited materials and to suspend any pre-formed opinion before having observed all the materials; second, to listen to the others; third, to be ready to be challenged and well-disposed to, eventually, change their own mind; fourth, to use what grasped for re-imagining the city they inhabit between this and the next meeting. After a brief introduction, participants were requested to individually write a short note about what is a mosque; this note was folded and put in a jar. The second activity consisted in placing a number of stickers upon a map of Bologna, representing the location of the various *musallayat* and the potential location of new ones; for this activity, participants were allowed to collaborate one with the other.

After this, participants proceeded to the other floor. The first room was dedicated to the Islamic spaces

⁷ “Tutte le credenze vive, tutti i desideri e le idee vive, devono essere rinnovate continuamente di generazione in generazione: ripensate, riconsiderate, rivolute, riedificate, se debbono continuare ad esistere”.



Figure 6 – Bristol, Easton Central Mosque



Figure 7 – Den Haag Moskee El Islam

in Bologna. The exhibited materials consisted in at least one photograph for every Islamic place of worship in the city, both interiors and exteriors, in a map illustrating their distribution, and in two short videos of 5 minutes each, one with the exteriors and one with moments of prayer. The second room was dedicated to the ten banners explaining what a mosque is for the Islamic tradition. In the same

room, a selection of Islamic spaces from three case studies – Bristol (fig. 6), London, and The Hague (fig. 7) – was presented through the same set of qualitative materials as for Bologna: photographs, videos, and maps. These cases were substantiating the points being made by the ten banners. First, a multiplicity of places for worship distributed across the urban space is required for responding to the need for Muslims to practice *salat* more than once a day. Second, a variety of styles can be employed, be these associated or not to a specific ethnic group or tradition, and that different styles were somehow responding to different architectural traditions on the context of territorialization.

The third and final activity of the first meeting was, then, a group discussion on the model of focus group. Participants were divided in smaller groups, each of these with a facilitator. Discussions were prompted by each participant reading one of the definitions of a mosque kept in the jar. Every opinion needed to be exemplified in reference to the exhibited visual materials. This activity has lasted for about one hour, with total time exceeding of about 30 minutes the expected slot of 2 hours (fig. 8).



Figure 8 – Una moschea per Bologna?

The second meeting was held on Sunday the 28th of February of 2016. The function of this meeting was to further unpack the topic and generate more specific insights for discussion. New materials were

exhibited in the second room of the second floor. Rather than the cases of Bristol, London and The Hague, more than 100 photographs from all over Europe were displayed; a new video with these materials was projected on the wall. During this meeting, participants were familiarised with strategies enacted by various European cities on the ways mosques can be built and integrated on a neighbourhood scale. They were invited to critically reflect on these pictures by referring to three intertwined conceptual axes. The first was that of 'Mosque vs. mosques'. The main question here was: does Bologna need to plan a new Grand Mosque, such as discussed in 2007 and always posed by media and the political debate, or rather a network of smaller mosques distributed across the whole metropolitan area? This question had to be unpacked on a number of other minor oppositions: should we privilege mobility or relations of proximity on the scale of the neighbourhood? Should we encourage the merging of a multiplicity of functions within the same complex or their distribution on a plurality of minor spaces? Should we prefer different places destined to different communities or one for the whole Islamic community? Should the mosque be ethnically and/or theologically homogeneous or rather mixed? The second axis was that of 'nostalgia vs. camouflage', and referred to architectural style. This axis would have been unpacked in the tensions between symbolic visibility or invisibility, traditional design or modernism, marking an oriental identity or emphasising change. The third and final axis was that of 'ex novo vs. refurbishment'. This implied some other questions about preferring building a new mosque or the recognition of informal *musallayat*, from building from scratch or reusing existing buildings, and finally the question of funding, public or private.

Participants were invited to discuss such materials in reference to Bologna. The chosen methodology was here that of Open Space Technology (OST), a scenario planning technique based on the principle that groups and roundtables are autonomously formed by the participants themselves, who decide the topics to be discussed and their framing. The task was for every group to produce the sketch of an ideal mosque, to be defined through a number of keywords and drawings. Participants were disposing of a series of maps to be filled with stickers. Groups did not have to necessarily find a unique consensual proposition, but to rather explore dissensus.

The third and last meeting, held on the 6th of March 2016, was a pin-up session dedicated to a plenary discussion. The aim was that every group discussion would have been re-presented to the wider audience for an interchange of ideas. The materials presented within previous workshops were collated into a series of hand-outs given to participants and into a brief introductory visual presentation that lasted for about 15 minutes. The presentation concluded with two maps produced by project's collaborator Luca Gulli: these maps showed the distribution of *musallayat* and a series of potential locations for a number of new purpose-built mosques. After this, representatives of each group from the second meeting were asked to deliver to all participants the data produced in group activities generated from OST. The aim

of this pin-up session was ultimately to foster ground for agreement and disagreement, while registering ideas through scenario planning methodologies. Interestingly, the session has lasted over 1 hour and 30 minutes longer than expected.

Two parallel activities were also set. The function of these activities was, on the one hand, they aimed at stimulating through other registers a more-than-discursive re-imagining of Islam and of the city; on the other, more pragmatically, they aimed at involving a different public. The first parallel activity, set for the 23rd of February, was the screening of a documentary named *Beyond Islam's Doors*, by the director Fabrizio Fantini. The film showed the building of the Grand Mosque of Ravenna in 2013, and presented the controversies it generated across the Muslim communities. A second activity would have been a walking tour of the neighbourhood of Bolognina. The walk was expected to be conducted by members of the association Next Generation, who usually run this activity under then name of Migrantour. The aim of this walk is to show to participants the affective attachment immigrants have towards Bologna and the practise of place-making actualized over a deprived area; for the occasion, the walk would have included two *musallayat* and an Evangelic church. The walk was initially set for the the 27th of February, but had to be rescheduled for rain. Set for the 5th of March, another day of intense rain had forced us to renounce once again. The walk had received over 50 bookings.

Overall, the workshop maintained an attendance of 30/35 individuals for each of the three meetings, the vast majority of whom took part at the whole workshop. Since the project had no affiliation with any institution, political party, or association, the number of participants can be considered satisfactory. More than the number per se, the workshop can be considered successful in reason of who participated: as said, a number of politicians from different parties, some architects and planners, key activists from both left or right wing movements, and many who simply read about the workshop and wanted to get involved. And more importantly, it can be considered successful because of the commitment and vivacity of the participants as well as for their positive feedbacks.

Nevertheless, the workshop has also encountered some significant difficulties. The first was the lack of responses by the political authority, and the second a certain suspicion encountered across the leaders of the Muslim communities. As explained by Yassine Lafram during the last meeting, “the mosque is not a topic for the electoral campaign, we don’t have any interest to talk about this now: we might want it or need it, but it wouldn’t be strategically wise to speak about this now”.

This position publicly emerged a few days after the last meeting was held. On the 4 of March, Bologna Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi declared that the city urgently needed “a new mosque”⁸. During the

⁸ News of 6 March 2016: <http://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/arcivescovo-zuppi-moschea-islam-scuole.html>

following days, the case was again on the news. In two occasions, both for *Repubblica* and for the *Corriere della Sera*, local and national newspapers, I was contacted and interviewed about the results of the workshop. In both occasions, I emphasised how the participants discarded the option of the Grand Mosque as unrealistic and unneeded in favour of a network of differently sized mosques, symbolically connoted as such while not always built from scratch, and legally recognised⁹ – this has been, ultimately, the strongest indication for planning emerged. Nevertheless, the focus on the media was still that of “the Mosque”, only one, and monumental, to be built ex novo. The problem of this framing emerged when members of the CIB, including the President Yassine Lafram, declared that the mosque was at the moment ‘inopportune’, and that it was not one of their requests¹⁰. Incongruously, the workshop itself was used by media for finding scientific evidence to that statement¹¹: the fact that, as I reported to the interviewers, workshop participants had rejected the idea of a monumental Grand Mosque for the whole community was used as an argument for leaving things as they were, with a plurality of informal and precarious *musallayat*.

Nevertheless, the debate moved in unpredictable ways. A few months later, during December 2016, Lafram would instead declare that a mosque is now required¹². The last voice to be heard comes again from the City Council: the Islamic community deserves a Grand Mosque to be built¹³. How will it end? And which one of the many communities in Bologna would coordinate the Grand Mosque, in case this would ever be built?

3. Una moschea per Roma?

The occasion for repeating the workshop in a different context, for correcting some of its frailties and improving what instead worked well, was offered to me few months after the end of Una moschea per Bologna?. During the course of the workshop, in fact, I was contacted by Valeria Fabretti of the CSPS (Centre for the Studies and Documentation of Religions and Political Institutions in Post-Secular

⁹ News of the 6 March 2016: <https://www.pressreader.com/italy/corriere-di-bologna/20160306/281599534591691>

¹⁰ News of the 8 March 2016: <http://www.radiocittafujiko.it/news/una-moschea-a-bologna-la-comunita-islamica-mai-chiesta>

¹¹ News of the 11 March 2016: http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/03/11/news/una_grande_moschea_a_bologna_i_musulmani_e_pre_matura_-135200843/

¹² News of the 15 December 2016: http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/12/15/news/la_comunita_islamica_dare_a_bologna_una_vera_moschea_-154170767/

¹³ News of the 12 February 2018: http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/02/14/news/una_moschea_a_bologna_il_comune_apre-188850258/

Societies) – a research centre founded at Tor Vergata University in Rome by the late sociologist Massimo Rosati and by the philosopher Alessandro Ferrara. During those months, the CSPA was setting up a research project on religious diversity in Rome. The project would later assume the name of NEW2US ('New Emerging Worship Patterns to Open Up Urban Space'). Funded by the Italian Minister for Education and Research and partnered by Tavolo Interreligioso di Roma, this framework aimed at producing a number of ethnographies around the various communities of faith in the city, while altogether setting a multiplicity of interfaith roundtables between religious groups and institutions. In September 2016, I decided then to join the NEW2US and adapt the project *Una moschea per Bologna?* to the infrastructures of Rome.

The context was challenging, and substantially different from that of Bologna. With an estimated population of 110.000 Muslims (Ciocca 2017), the second biggest religious group after Catholics, the city of Rome is in fact Italy's Islam Capital. The city has a monumental Grand Mosque (fig. 9), La Grande Moschea di Roma, for two decades the largest Islamic space across the non-Islamic world – until Köln's Central Mosque completed its construction in 2017. Provided with two prayer halls, a Qur'anic school, a library, an auditorium, and an expositive space, the complex was inaugurated in 1995, more than twenty years after Rome's City Council donated 30.000 square meters to the Centro di Cultura Islamico d'Italia, constituted by the Prince of Afghanistan and by Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, king of Saudi Arabia.

In the February of 1973, at the beginning of the oil crisis, Faisal was visiting Rome in order to stipulate an agreement for commercial and economic cooperation. It was during this occasion that he expressed to Giulio Andreotti, at the time Italy's Prime Minister, his concerns about Islam's condition in Europe, and enquired about the possibilities of erecting the first mosque in the Italian territory. At the time, before the 1984 revision of the Lateran Treaty, stipulated by Mussolini and the Vatican State in 1929 and confirmed by the post-war Republican Constitution, Catholicism was Italy's state religion, and the construction of the mosque had thus to be negotiated between the Italian Government and Pope Paul VI. While Faisal's demand was promptly accepted, the first stone was laid only ten years later.

The original project, authored by the architect Paolo Portoghesi with the supervision of Vittorio Gigliotti and Sami Mousawi, received in fact the strenuous opposition of several actors. First of all, a coalition of citizens and the environmentalist group Italia Nostra, who criticized both the siting of the Islamic centre and its design. Since the chosen lot borders Villa Ada and one of Rome's seven hills, the project was objected because it would have interrupted the continuity between that park and the river Tiber – even though, in reality, other developments had already been built in the area, such as Campi Sportivi, opened in 1969. Its design was instead criticized for its impact on the city's skyline, since the minaret would have been taller than Saint Peter's dome – even though the building, closeted in the northern area of the city between Monte Antenne and Parioli, would have been as a matter of fact invisible from any other area



Figure 9 – Rome, Grande Moschea di Roma – Photo by Ulixes Pictures

of the city. Others intervened in the debate for denouncing how the new religious site would have constituted nothing but a profanation of the Holy City¹⁴; the conservative Catholic group ‘Centro Culturale Lepanto’, for example, claimed that it would have represented “a dangerous outpost for the Islamic conquest of Europe”¹⁵. According to Giulio Andreotti, one of the most influential political personalities of the whole history of the Republic, portrayed in 2008 by Paolo Sorrentino in the Cannes-awarded biopic *Il Divo*, no opposition came from the Vatican but only from the environmentalists¹⁶; diversely, Paolo Portoghesi recently stated that it was Andreotti himself who ensured the project got stuck with the institution of a committee for environmental impact¹⁷. According to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, the centre is nowadays governed through a partnership between Saudi Arabia, who is the

¹⁴ News of the 9 December 1984: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/12/09/per-musulmani-di-roma-un-minareto-alto.html>

¹⁵ News of the 9 April 1993: http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/1993/04/09/Altro/MOSCHEA-DI-ROMA-ANCORA-POLEMICHE---PORTOGHESI-RIFN34_140400.php

¹⁶ News of the 20 June 1995: http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/1995/06/20/Cronaca/MOSCHEA-RIVELAZIONI---PAOLO-VI-NON-POSE-VETI-ALLA-COSTRUZIONE_174500.php

¹⁷ News of the 4 May 2016: <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/05/04/italia/cronache/larchitetto-della-grande-moschea-di-roma-fu-un-omaggio-dellitalia-allarabia-saudita-NQrlkECDSfkR19261aVYiN/pagina.html>



Figure 10 – Rome, Masjid E Makki



Figure 11 – Rome, Masjid E Rome

main funder, Morocco, who supervises its management, and Egypt, in control of the theological line.

Even though its completion constitutes a major achievement for Italian politics and its realization can be praised for its architectural quality, the Grand Mosque is far from adequately fulfilling the needs of Rome's Islamic communities. Alongside the unpractical location in which Rome's Grand Mosque is sited, this can be said for at least for two reasons. First, the Muslim population in Rome has grown significantly during the last 22 years, from an estimated population of 15.000 to the today's estimated 110.000 (Ciocca 2017). Moreover, what changed is the ethnic composition of Muslims, wherein the biggest group is now that of Bangladeshi heritage, 37% of the total, and more than 40 different nationalities are represented. Second, let alone special events such as conferences or exhibitions, the centre is open for only two days a week: in occasion of Friday's *salāt* and on Saturday morning, for pre-booked guided tours.

This point is particularly critical. A Muslim practices *salāt* five times a day, or in three timings in the case of some Shi'as. Since the prescribed times vary accordingly with the position of the sun, to practice the ritual prayer in congregation is particularly onerous during working days. Moreover, currently the function of a mosque largely exceeds that of praying, for it is a communitarian centre for dialogue, counselling, solidarity, and so forth. For all these reasons, a number of new associations and more than 50 *musallayat*, prayer halls, are now active across the city. Differently from Bologna, Rome's Muslim communities are represented by a Grand Mosque; nevertheless, this does not suffice the demand for spaces for worship (fig. 10 and 11).

Moreover, as I discovered during my months in the field, the Grand Mosque is often criticized for being distant from Muslims' everyday life and needs – a critique demonstrated by the longstanding tensions between Grand Mosque's representatives and CAIL's. For this reason, the title of Rome's workshop reproduced that of Bologna's: *Una moschea per Roma?*: what other scenario should Rome produce other than the centrality of an isolated, monumental Grand Mosque and a plurality of precarious *musallayat*?

3.1 *Setting the workshop*

In order to set the workshop in Rome, a number of adaptations to the format experimented in Bologna had to be made. First, the project had to be more inclusive, with a wider variety of actors and communities invited to be part of the workshop process from the very beginning. This aspect has been in part fulfilled in virtue of the partnership with the CSPS, and in part through the relations I have gained during the course of my work in Bologna. Moreover, during the months before the start of the workshop I personally initiated a number of conversations with several activists and communities operating in Rome as well as on the national scale. The presence of the CSPS and of Tavolo Interreligioso di Roma also guaranteed a strong participation from both institutions and political actors.

Second, I needed a new team. In part, the team of researcher was constituted by members of the CSPS,

such as the sociologist Valeria Fabretti and the anthropologist Piero Vereni, and their academic collaborators from neighbouring academic institutions, such as Fabrizio Ciocca, Maria Chiara Giorda and Alessandro Saggioro from Università La Sapienza, and Renata Pepicelli from LOUISS. Alongside these people, I decided to introduce some new collaborators. On the one hand, I wanted to consolidate the team's knowledge on planning procedures – an aspect that cannot be discussed in this work, but that nonetheless has constituted an integral part of the project. The project then associated various academics from Gran Sasso Social Institute (GSSI), coordinated by planning theorist Francesco Chiodelli. GSSI contributed to the workshop with their extensive qualitative research findings on the existing spaces for Islam in Rome as well as for what concerns planning codes on both the local and the national scale. Alongside this, using their established expertise on normative aspects around urban planning for religious pluralism, they also facilitated a final plenary session and the collating of the final report. On the other hand, I aimed at strengthening the connection with performative arts. The project attempted to make extensive use of a participatory arts framework. This has been obtained in virtue of the expertise of Panayiota Demetriou, interdisciplinary live artist, practitioner, and researcher at Bath Spa University in the UK. Panayiota's involvement in the project was oriented in producing the artistic involvement and the exhibition of the informative materials. Moreover, her role consisted in facilitating the interactions between the meeting on planning and the parallel activities. Other collaborators included the group of photographers, 'Ulixes Pictures', and the video-journalist Francesco Conte, from 'Termini TV', who both contributed to the gathering of qualitative materials on Rome's Islam.

The main change was nevertheless meant to improve the use of creative imagination. The key was trying to adopt an imaginative approach for soliciting a deeper understanding of Islam's core teachings and of Muslims' spatial demands, and altogether a contemplation of the everyday sacred in the city. Imagination had, in other words, to be more directly employed in its noetic capacity, that is, in its capacity to mediate between the self-disclosure of the world and knowledge. In the context of the workshop, imagination would have the scope of challenging opinions and discursive knowledge, while helping to desecularizing planning and decolonializing beauty. Such a principle, I felt, was served at best by including a number of activities based on traditional Islamic sacred arts within the workshop: alongside Islamic architecture, to include Islamic poetry and plastic arts, by providing two parallel practical workshops in which theological contents were combined with a synesthetic experience of the environment. These activities were strategic for two pragmatic reasons: first, by allowing the participants to access the Islamic conceptions of 'beauty', arts would have contributed to stimulating a dialogue with their own lived understanding of place and of the sacred; second, art practice would have been used as a common language for enhancing public engagement beyond discursive reason. More radically, activities centred on Islamic arts would have helped introduce theology as, rather than the doctrinal expression of the exoteric, the experience of the self-manifestation of a theophany contended between the seen and the unseen. As explained by Nasr

(1987), Islamic sacred arts differ from secular arts for they enact an intimate relationship between hidden cosmologies and the act of creation:

“Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity. It reflects in a blinding manner the Unity of the Divine Principle, the dependence of all multiplicity upon the One, the ephemerality of the world and the positive qualities of cosmic existence or creation ... This art makes manifest, in the physical order directly perceivable by the senses, the archetypal realities and acts, therefore, as a ladder for the journey of the soul from the visible and the audible to the Invisible which is also Silence transcending all sound” (7).

In other words, Islamic sacred art is an attempt of capturing the harmony of nature and its rhythms. Rather than representative, it is instead an extension of the sacred qualities of creation. The fundamental characteristics of Islamic art – architecture, plastic arts, poetry, calligraphy, and music – are encapsulated in the Qur’anic experience of space, a geometry of beauty that reproduces itself in a series of forms replicating the formless centre of creation. One of its principles is then the use of negative space, the void, determined by the absence of corporeality, as “the symbol of both the transcendence of God and his presence in all things” (186). Through this, sacred arts have the function of guiding men to the *alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginalis*. Accordingly, rather than a creator ex nihilo, the artist becomes a vehicle for divine creation, and a means for the expression of forms and contents of the revelation. Rather than in originality, artistic talent is that of capturing the unfolding of metaphysics, “disclosing the beauty of this world, and revealing through the theophany of God in beautiful forms the transcendent nature of the source of this theophany ... the creative power of such an artist, far from being stifled, is freed from the fetters and limitations of his own subjective self, gaining a universality and power which would be impossible otherwise” (80-81).

Three UK based Islamic art practitioners were contacted and chosen for being an active part of the project. The first was Shaheen Kasmani, surface pattern and textile designer, formed at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts. The second was Ayesha Gamiet, illustrator and art educator; formed at the University of Cambridge and trained in illuminated manuscripts in Turkey. Gamiet teaches at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts but has a wide experience of teaching across the Islamic world, from Medina to Jaddah and Malaysia. The third was Shagufta K. Iqbal, a spoken-word artist and workshop facilitator working on Urdu, Arabic and Persian poetic traditions.

The project was thought as the coming together of four different parts. The first was constituted by a series of three meetings open to the public gathered by the project partner Tavolo Interreligioso di Roma, including Muslim and non-Muslim communities, institutional actors, civic organisations, and private



Figure 12 – Poster for *Una moschea per Roma?* – Art by Elisa Bozzarelli



Figure 13 – *Una moschea per Roma?*

citizens. These meetings were structured on the same format experimented in Bologna. The location was La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, one of the most prestigious art galleries and institutions across the city, who provided us three contiguous rooms for three weeks. The three meetings were set on three consecutive Saturdays – 6, 13 and 20 May 2017, one week before the start of Ramadan 2017 (fig. 13).

The second part was dedicated to the two workshops dedicated to traditional Islamic arts. The first was led by Ayesha Gamiet and Shaheen Kasmani. The artists introduced participants to pattern design in Islamic art, focusing on its theological and cosmological foundations. The second workshop was delivered by Shagufta K Iqbal, which took the form of three poetic improvisation workshops held in a *musalla* and in walking performance across the neighbourhood of Torpignattara. The artist engaged Muslim and non-Muslim participants by encouraging them to produce and perform original verses inspired by Islamic poetry about their own affective relationship with the sacred and the city. The artistic outputs of these workshops along with other artefacts produced by the artists for the occasion, have been exhibited within the space of the three core public meetings as a participatory visual/audio installation curated by Panayiota Demetriou. These also featured workshop participants' poetry, interviews, and soundscape materials, creating a narrative exchange as well co-creating the narrative depicted in the installation. Moreover, they were exhibited for two weeks at the foyer of the Cinema Detour.

The fourth part of the project was a final plenary meeting. Held on the 29 May 2017 at the Tavolo Interreligioso di Roma, this meeting focused on the presentation of the final report of the workshop,

followed by a Q&A session.

3.2 *Art workshops: Islamic patterns and cosmologies, Islamic poetry and performing the city*

In the context of *Una moschea per Roma?* traditional Islamic sacred arts have constituted a *terra franca* between facilitators and participants, and between different religions. On a first level, art has been employed to approach Islamic theology from within its specific modes of expression, by mobilizing curiosity and wonder. This was directed to both non-Muslims, who were called to be self-critical about their own ways of conceiving the ontology of art, and for Muslims, who were instead encouraged to revert social marginalization and take the lead, rediscovering the experiential aspects of their own spirituality with others. Artefacts produced for and by the participants were used for individually and collectively re-imagining grounded theologies, that is, the significance of the sacred and of sacred space in the everyday city. In sum, the strategy enacted was to expose our participants to the spiritual significance of beauty in Islam: both Muslims and non-Muslims were invited to rediscover the unsayable tensions between the seen and the unseen, while decolonizing beauty, ultimately reframing through artistic practice and play established identities and power relations. On a second level, arts were used for provoking social engagement and facilitating direct interaction. The arts used in the project helped pave a different way of being-with between the project's facilitators and the participants: a common space welcoming different individuals and different communities, divided by conflicting interests and visions on the future of Rome but here united by a shared set of activities and rules. By merging methods from social science and arts, the project aimed at transcending discursive reason, instead unfolding arts' capacity to solicit affective responses and emotional engagement.

The first workshop, facilitated by Ayesha Gamiel and Shaheen Kasmani, introduced participants to Islamic plastic arts, with a specific attention on the relations between Islamic patterns and cosmologies (fig. 14). The workshop took place over the course of two-days, on the 9 and 10 of May. The course was set at La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Workshop participants were taught about the historical and ontological principles within which Islamic art developed; altogether, classes consisted of practical sessions, whereby participants were taught how to construct traditional Islamic geometric patterns, create their own Islamic-inspired floral designs, and experiment a number of painting and gilding techniques from the Islamic tradition. This served to bridge the project's core activities on architecture and planning with a more general reflection on the relations between Islamic theology and sense of beauty, by engaging participants in the language of Islamic arts. In fact, Islamic patterns constitute the primary form of decoration of mosques, both of their exteriors and interiors. Composed of calligraphy and geometrical motives, phytomorphic shapes using the outline of a leaf and of a flower, the scope of patterns is to reproduce Islamic principle of recursivity of life and unity of being (Burckhardt 2009). The workshop focused on the spiritual significance of experiencing this art, of its practice and of

its contemplation.

The workshop was structured on two meetings of three hours each: the first hour was dedicated to a frontal lecture, with the remaining two hours used for practical exercises. The first session, facilitated by Shaheen Kasmani, was focused on geometry and symmetry. The second session was instead led by Ayesha Gamiet and explored the principles of floral compositions, *islami*. Each of these sessions has put in conversation the cosmological groundings of Islamic patterns with the compositive principles Islamic sacred space. The central part of the workshop discussed the structural principles of the mosque, and participants were invited to draw its essential character. One sketch stood out. Entitled ‘The Spider Mosque’, its architectural structure mirrored the *Story of Hijrah*. The participant envisioned its ideal mosque in the shape of a spider, wherein each of the spider’s legs represented a different space dedicated to a different mosque’s attendants desire: a space for ablution and another for prayer, a space for contemplating beauty, a space for women, a space for children, a space for education, and a space for discussion. The compositions elaborated during the course were exhibited during the three core meetings.



Figure 14 – Ayesha Gamiet – Photo by Panayiota Demetriou

The second workshop centred on Islamic poetry and was curated by Shagufta K Iqbal. Drawing on existing poetic traditions from Urdu, Arabic, Persian, and English, it included three sessions of an improvisational poetry course, held in the space of a *musalla* sited in the neighbourhood of Torpignattara,

and a final mobile performance through the street of the area (fig. 15). The initial aim of this workshop was to engage during the phase of the course only Muslim participants, encouraging them to produce and perform for a heterogeneous public audience original verses about their own affective relationship with Islam and the city. Nevertheless, seeing as many non-Muslims local to the area were keen to attend the workshops, given our emphasis on inclusivity it was decided to adapt the planned activities to all whom were interested in attending. Ultimately, this prompted an intergenerational and multilingual context, with participants from Bangladesh, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana, and Italy; while the majority of the participants were Muslims, the course included members of other religions and nonreligious individuals. Overall, the course was followed by 20 participants.



Figure 15 – Una moschea per Roma? Workshop on poetic improvisation – Photo by Panayiota Demetrious

During the first stage participants were introduced to the works of Islamic theologian and poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi. The course used a variety of individual and group writing exercises centred on synaesthesia, spatial memory, and recollection. In order to acquire skills on poetic improvisation, these sessions included a series of writing exercises that made use of sensual dispositions for poetically re-presenting the sanctuary of sacred space unfolded in imagination. The conclusive event, set for the evening of the 14th of May, has been initially framed as a promenade performance, where participants from the course would tour audiences around the neighbourhood of Torpignattara while performing their poetry. The rationale of this was that of disclosing through poetry the sacredness of a neighbourhood which was

usually negatively depicted by the media precisely in reason of its Muslim population and *musallayat* – assumed as deviant, alien to Italian cityscape, and indifferent or even hostile towards Italian culture (Fiore 2016).

However, a drastic change to its structure had to all to be made suddenly.

In order to perform such an event, it was required to notify it to Rome's central police station. While this act is generally nothing but a formality, the fact that it was about Islamic poetry and a mosque as well as the siting in a troubled neighbourhood have generated unexpected concerns from the police. What was meant to be a mere notification became instead a strenuous negotiation over the course of two days, led by the anti-terrorism branch. At the end of this, even though I have largely stressed our aims and our non-affiliation to any of the competing groups, the police delegate refused to authorize the form of walking performance and rather proposed a sit-in. The location in which this would have been happening was also not the one we proposed: the final site for the performance was in fact at 1 hour walk distance from the one we proposed, which was the entrance of the *musalla* where the course had place. Even though rejected, our application was still somehow suspended, as the police delegate promised me that we would find an informal resolution later on.

Not surprisingly, these unexpected tensions generated a certain disillusionment across the course participants, and some of the key Muslim community organizers decided to step back from their commitment.

Our decision was to modify the structure of the event: rather than a walking performance, we would replicate the improvisational techniques used during the course, this time including the audience of the event. All participants and publics would have been asked to create their own in-situ narratives while sitting-in, prompted by the poetry of Rumi and by the course participants' contributions. Nevertheless, when the audience gathered at the meeting point, in Largo Preneste, the police intervened with squad cars and stopped our performance with the accusation of forming a non-authorized demonstration.

The incident was followed by 30 minutes' negotiation, during which we requested to be allowed to perform our performance in its original form. After documents were checked and a number of telephone calls with the central police department, we have been finally allowed to proceed. Police intervention had the unwanted result of motivating and uniting the audience and the participants.

Finally given the authorization to walk around the neighbourhood, the structure of the event had once again been transformed. The plan was now to proceed from Largo Preneste to the Muslim Centre where the poetic workshops took place. The audience-led performance was co-created using the creative writing exercises employed during the workshops. During the walk, a number of stopping points were selected.

Here, after the reading of two pieces from the course participants, the members of the audience were asked to write a stanza, articulating images of sacred space as they were evoked by the environment. One different set of questions equal to one stanza, each related to a different sense, was given for each stop. The participants were instructed to fold their writing over and hand it to someone in the audience that they were not acquainted with, where the process of writing continued at the next stop, on the same piece of paper. These scrolls of paper with collaborative have been unravelled, shared and read together only at the end of our journey, at the Muslim Centre. Overall, the event has been attended by around 40 people, alongside the course participants, and lasted for 2 hours.

4. Conclusions: on postsecular planning

Katie McClymont holds that postsecular theories should contribute to a radical redefinition of urban planning for both its theoretical principles and its praxis (2015). According to her reading, the most prominent import of postsecularism is that of challenging a rigid divide between the secular and the religious, with the former conceived as the locus of scientific rationality and the latter as that of irrational faith. For planning, the acknowledgement of such a principle has two implications.

First, it signifies that religion exceeds the boundaries of formally organized religions and official theologies: if the aim of planning is to protect and accommodate religious diversity, the inclusion of a variety of established faith communities within the margins of pre-existing deliberative procedures is not sufficient. Religious diversity, as extensively discussed across the previous chapters of this work, cannot be fully grasped by uniquely referring to categories such as religious membership and affiliation; institutional religious groups represent, in fact, only part of a wider nova effect of perpetually shifting lived engagements with the world, one merging with the others. For this reason, McClymont argues, a postsecular framework suggests that approaches based on difference and identities are incapable of grasping the whole picture and are bound to fail, for the precise reason that they are epistemically reductive. What is instead required is to fully recognise that religion, more than a distinct sphere of the social or as an epiphenomenon of individual identities, can be better understood as a register that we all dispose of for thinking about the existent and being, a register in direct opposition with instrumental rationality. Therefore, planning the religious must be “open to all regardless of designated identity; you do not have to be an active part of any established religious community for it to be meaningful to you. It offers a different understanding of human experience, an engagement with values such as ‘beauty’ and ‘awe’ cannot be expressed instrumentally” (538).

Second, and consequentially, postsecular theories suggest that the spatiality of religion cannot be bound to official sacred places: for this, the scope of planning must exceed that of merely offering a more just provision of places of worship to the communities of faith. For McClymont, postsecular planning should instead be thought as a tool for recognizing, engaging and even promoting the thriving of municipal

spirituality, that is, that register of place-making which “gives access to the transcendent, a potentially counter-hegemonic way of being, an alternative set of values underpinned by shared humanity not economic growth” (542-543). The places in which municipal spirituality is manifest, according to her view, are those whose value transcends the merely instrumental and comprises the common good. In her work, these places are identified with cemeteries, community assets, and nature – places whose common trait is that their “claims to value are spiritually inclusive rather than for a defined denomination or established faith” (549). Under this approach, postsecular planning specifically aims at challenging the secular understanding according to which religious spaces are distinct, privatized domains strictly separated from public space by neat communitarian boundaries. Instead, it aims at promoting an a-confessional opening to the invisible, by emphasising the spiritual significance of places that are nonetheless “inclusive, for all faiths or none” (546).

Even though her arguments are, to many extents, convincing, my view on the purposes of urban planning under a postsecular framework differs from that of McClymont. On one side, while I agree about the need for planning to capture and appreciate the spatial role of the religious beyond officially religious places, and to be inclusive of any position within the nova effect, I do not think that this should be seen in opposition to a renewed dedication for providing space for worship to specific religious groups. On the contrary, I assume that to adequately respond to the spatial demands of communities of faith constitutes the prime, unescapable task for a geographical thought inspired by the postsecular.

As discussed on the lines of this thesis, as much as they must not reinstate the primacy of a specific confession over the others, postsecularism and pluralism must equally avoid the reduction of religions to their lowest common denominator. The key, as said, is instead to balance the need for dialogue and mutual understanding with the respect of theological specificity. To pose the principle of inclusivity and to favour non-confessional spaces as the domain of postsecular planning is, still, theologically prescriptive and somehow discriminatory. It is discriminatory because, first, religious groups have the right to be closed groups with clear-cut boundaries and restricted access – just like any other group or club which is not marked as religious. And secondly, because place matters: specific places, in fact, differently express the hegemony of an historically dominant religion, and differently express the dominant grounded theology. They do this on both the physicality of the built environment, on values and discourses expressed and reproduced in the everyday, and on planning regulations. While we can concur with the fact that, in Italy as in the large majority of Europe, spaces for Christianity are increasingly subordinated by those of the secular, we cannot overlook that such spaces are often qualitatively remarkable, and that their presence still largely exceeds the demand, as testified by the disuse and conversion of churches declared as redundant (della Dora 2016). Diversely, other groups are instead explicitly or implicitly marginalized, and often constricted to symbolic invisibility by adverse political climate or planning code,

often shaped on the lines of the majority religion. If it is true that instrumental rationality in planning is anti-religious per se and that, for this, its secular rationale is hostile to any sort of truth claim referred to an ineffable reality, it cannot be underestimated that religious minorities are particularly discriminated – especially when funding is scarce. As summarised by Luz (2015: 282-283):

“...minorities and marginalized groups [are] more susceptible to scrutiny and suspicion as they intensify their contest with hegemonic discourse and construct visible sites (i.e. religious sites) that rise from religious alterity, different spatial logic, and different understanding of the city. These claims are exerted to through sacred places and their renovations. Thus, conflicting voices, visions, and desires emerge from religiously framed identity politics to contend with and prevail against modernistic planning procedure and spatial logic”.

For postsecular planning to relinquish from providing places of worship for the religious communities would be, therefore, particularly detrimental for minorities. To actively support, both epistemically and politically, their struggle is instead a crucial step for establishing and promoting the right to religious difference – a principle that, as I have demonstrated earlier in the text, is coextensive to the project of postsecularism.

The vocabulary of the postsecular can help at better substantiating such a challenge through improving planning practices. Postsecular awareness about the fluidity of the margins between religion and nonreligion, rather than motivating planners at providing religious spaces for everyone, must instead help to desecularize the ways we think about difference. To accommodate the spatial demands of specific religious groups is to oppose their social *and* theological discrimination: to do so, rather than defending only that specific community, is to defend for everyone the right to the city and the right to difference. To actively work for responding to the spatial claims of a marginalized community is something valuable for the city as a whole, even though that which the space planners would give shape to is not open to all.

On the other side, while it is correct to say that “it is with the ‘invisible’ that planning needs to engage if it is to meet the challenge of postsecularism” and that “sacredness is an aspect potentially present in places” (McClymont 2015: 538), it is equally important to remember that the visible is also an essential component of religion. In the language used across this work, the postsecular reminds us that for every *ẓāhir* there is always a *batin*, and that religion is nothing but the attempt to articulate the eruption of the unseen across the seen. The visible is essential for religious individuals because it provides the means through which the invisible is self-disclosed; and it is essential for every *homo religiosus*, for everyone’s everyday life is sensuously experienced within the world of bodies. To argue that what matters for the territorialisation of religion is only the invisible is to dogmatically reject a plurality of different grounded theologies, and to actively regulate their own doctrinal and methodical apparatus. Altogether, I contend

that to dismiss the importance of the visible is dangerous for postsecular challenges precisely because it validates the claim according to which the aesthetic quality of the place provided by planning to a specific community is irrelevant, and that what matters is only that a space, whatever space, responds to the functional requirements being set by planning. That, in other words, a *musallayat* equals a *masjid*, a mosque, and that the form in which these are realised is not relevant for their functioning and for their sacrality.

As said, one of the subtexts of both *Una moschea per Bologna?* and *Una moschea per Roma?* was the tension between the construction ex-novo of new mosques and the recognition of informal makeshift places. During one workshop's final plenary session, one of the participants argued that informality could represent for the Muslim communities an occasion for theological reflection and spiritual enrichment – just like it has been for Christianity during the post-war period. This contribution was vehemently contested by most of the participants, both Muslim and non-Muslim. It must be noted that one of the reasons of criticism lied on the fact that this contribution was advanced by a non-Muslim, eventually a well-known Catholic architect. One can agree with Luz (2015) and Yiftachel (2009), according to whom informality constitutes a fundamental dimension under which communities creatively produce their spaces beyond the margins of official planning. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the informality of urban *musallayat* is in most of the cases the result of political and socio-economic segregation; that many of the communities inhabiting such places would relocate to a permanent mosque, if only that was allowed by planning regulations. Form matters, and so too does beauty – this is especially true for religion, and especially true for Islam. It is true that beauty cannot be expressed instrumentally, but it is also true that beauty is instrumental to religious practice, for it is inseparable from spirituality. Alongside the right to difference, we must fully maintain for the right to beauty. What is key, for planning and for the postsecular project, is not to dematerialize beauty, but to decolonialise it: to open the city up to different conceptions of beauty, to different processes of *aisthesis* and different acts of imagination (Jackson 2016). This argument has been central in the design and unfolding of my research-by-practice workshop.

By now composed by the two workshops *Una moschea per Bologna?* and *Una moschea per Roma?*, the project *Rethinking the Mosque: Sacred Space and the City* forms a novel model for postsecular planning. It tries to mediate the conflict over mosques in three ways. First, it aims at helping planners and inter-faith communities decide which strategies to employ on religious pluralism. It does so by operating *before* planning processes and deliberative procedures are initiated. Through the workshop, new knowledge is co-produced via the sharing of informative materials and the enactment of a variety of participatory activities. The workshop platform is fully inclusive: it is addressed to Muslim communities, for them to publicly express their spatial demands and improve their characteristics in dialogue with the citizenship; to planning authorities and technicians, for them to approach a specialist subject outside the frame of political negotiations and to contribute to the shaping of a planning application in a non-deliberative

context; and to the extended citizenship, ranging from those who are supportive to Muslims' cause to those who are against it, for them to better understand the significance of the issue and to actively participate to the debate.

Second, the project aims at directly addressing collaborative policy-making with citizen contribution to religious space application strategies. The workshop has the final purpose of producing a series of indications for planning, to be collated in a report disseminated through media and delivered to public administration. These guidelines, although preliminary and provisional, have the scope of supporting further planning negotiations.

Third, it aims at renewing approaches to planning practices by re-focusing participation on creative imagination and apophatic pluralism. The workshop stimulates participants' sense-perception by exposing them to images coming from the everyday city and traditional Islamic sacred arts. In doing so, it offers a vision of Islamic theology from within, and at the same time solicits self-awareness about the role of the sacred across both religious and nonreligious participants. To achieve these tasks, its design is hybrid by nature: it embraces modes of participative planning from communicative planning and from visioning, it uses arts and play; it has clear political aims and moves from principles of agonistic pluralism while at the same time trying to sublimate conflicts through promoting a search for the sacred and for transcendence. As I have stressed in the previous chapters, what religious diversity demands is to think of the social as the coming together of an undefined plurality of particularisms and syncretisms, one incommensurable to the other: while none of them can be final for the society as a whole, each of them needs to be accommodated and respected for what it is. And it needs to thrive, to be able to express its own truth claims and its own spatiality, as well as its own sense of beauty. How could we tackle Islamophobia and the epistemic and political marginalization of Islamic communities? I maintain that a valuable way is to tackle discursive reason by promoting a desecularized, and decolonial, understanding of imagination. What we need is to cultivate spirituality and ethics of care, while at the same time being self-critical about the solutions we propose when reflecting on the difficulties of the religious other.

Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the project has encountered many challenges. First of all, its outcomes have only partially fulfilled its aim, as its results have only marginally impacted the public debate. Some of these problems can be in part attributed to bad timing. While in Bologna the workshop was held during the electoral campaign, in Rome it happened just after the seating of the new mayor. As it asks participants to publicly express their own opinion about a rather slippery and contentious topic such as that of Islamic spaces, to participate is extremely risky. For this reason, many institutional actors and key stakeholders invited to the meetings ultimately preferred to not participate. Many, and this is the case of the representatives of the Rome's Grand Mosque, explicitly demanded to be officially credited as organizers, to host part of the initiatives in their own space, and to reframe the workshop in the form of

a symposium – in other words, they requested to completely amend the ethos of the project, and for a protected space as key speakers, in virtue of which to avoid confrontation.

How can institutional participation be achieved? I argue that, in order to succeed, the project needs to be perceived by the stakeholders as an opportunity to improve their administrative action, on the one hand, and as an unavoidable stage to be crossed, on the other. Despite having a more structured organization and a stronger team, the workshop in Rome was unable to attract the same number of participants as in Bologna. One of the reasons might have been the fact that Rome is a much bigger city and that the project did not obtain the same visibility as in Bologna; for example, it was presented by the media on only one occasion, in a quite controversial article in which it was presented as the attempt of the CAIL and Dhuumcatu to build a Grand Mosque in Torpignattara¹⁸. For this reason, a key strategic learning might be to repeat the experience in a smaller city.

At the same time, Islamic communities are often competing with each other. This condition has, unfortunately, limited the participation and the quality of the encounters. While in Bologna the outcomes of the project were somehow deterred by the ambiguous relations between Merola and Lafram, as well as by the tensions between Lafram and other Islamic groups, in Rome it was instead obstructed by the conflicts between the Grand Mosque and CAIL – with the latter trying to make the workshop their own and the former trying to jeopardise it.

Moreover, the setting of the workshop would have benefited from more time and planning. On both occasions, my presence in the field was perceived as that of an outsider and the workshop overlapped with other initiatives, which resulted in many of the potential participants opting out of the workshop. What is required is to spend more time in the field, and to more carefully build a series of meaningful relations with key associations and stakeholders, so that they are directly involved in the organization of the workshop from its first steps. This strategy, nonetheless, must be balanced with the need for the project to be autonomous from both institutions and partisan groups.

One final difficulty to note has been that, especially for the Rome workshop, many of the participants, especially the most eloquent community leaders, were reluctant in moving out from established conversational routines. In other words, despite the facilitators' attempts of challenging pre-made opinions through a variety of participatory activities and the exposition to a multiplicity of images, verbal modalities dominated many moments of the workshop. A response to this problem must be found, again, in more cautious community organizing. What is needed, in other words, is to enlarge and diversify the composition of the participants. Altogether, it is crucial to invest attention on the intermingling with

¹⁸ News of 5 May 2017: <http://www.iltempo.it/roma-capitale/2017/05/05/news/a-roma-una-nuova-grande-moschea-1028006/>

participatory planning and participatory arts. The experience in Rome demonstrates that the more interesting contributions might arrive from the moments in which participants are able to dismiss their discursive habits and are open to play.

Despite these challenges, much has been achieved: the meetings were lively and enjoyed intense participation, they generated insightful debates and unexpected responses, they created new networks and new alliances. Much has nonetheless to be done. I maintain that it is essential to keep trying.

Conclusions

As I write the last lines of this thesis, Italy is approaching the final week of the 2018 electoral campaign. A particularly virulent campaign, like several others in recent times, in Italy as well as in many other parts of the world. The attention of media platforms has been focused almost entirely on two topics: on the one hand, immigration; on the other, the resurgence of fascism. Things started falling apart when Luca Traini, a former Lega Nord candidate whose right temple is tattooed with a SS symbol, drove his car to the city centre of Macerata and started shooting at any black person on sight. After having wounded six people, he eventually got arrested. The moment before the arrest Traini wrapped his own shoulders in an Italian flag and mimicked the fascist salute. This was the first terrorist attack from the early '90s, when a number of car bombs exploded across the country as a complement to the strategy of tension in Mafia-state negotiation. Nevertheless, only few media and political leaders used the term terrorism: Traini has been defined as a lone-avenger, as an extremist or a psychopath, but neither a fascist nor a terrorist. At the same time, other leaders and parties were instead expressing their solidarity to Traini. One of them was Forza Nuova, which offered him financial support for legal costs. The view expressed by Forza Nuova was that Traini's action, however disproportionate, was nothing but the direct consequence of the social and cultural problems generated by left-wing parties: uncontrolled immigration and the Islamisation of the country. A similar position was held by Matteo Salvini, Lega Nord candidate for prime minister and possible winner of the elections.

As the tone of the campaign escalated, few days later Salvini would promise that, in case of victory, each of the 1.200 *musallayat* in the country will be closed. Islam, he argued, is entirely incompatible with Italian Constitution. And few days later again, he sworn on the Constitution, and on the bible, while handling a rosary. Many noticed that Salvini's gestures were sanctioning a momentous shift in the party's politics. Lega Nord's was founded in the late 1980's by Umberto Bossi as a federalist party. Designed at first as an anti-establishment grassroots movement, Lega's political allegation was the autonomy or even the secession of Padania, an invented region that would extend from Emilia-Romagna to Italy's northern boundaries. The party's rhetoric, especially in its early days, has been characterized for its racist tones against Southern Italians, well exemplified by the infamous motto *Roma ladrona*, 'Down with thieving Rome'. Lega had for years a puzzling relationship with Catholicism, and in particular with the Catholic Church. First, the Church was assimilated to Italian immobilism and corruption. Second, the political project of Padania was sustained by a myth of origins according to which people from northern Italy,

rather than Christian, would descend from Celtic tribes: in several occasions, Lega's public meetings have been the theatre of pagan rituals, conducted by personalities such as Bossi himself or Roberto Calderoli. Nevertheless, as Lega slowly turned into a national party, for being three times part of a government coalition with Berlusconi, favourable references to Catholicism and Christian heritage became more frequent and prominent (Guolo 2011). As separatist arguments were hardly appealing when running for national elections, and hardly plausible when occupying institutional positions, Lega had to reinvent its identity as a conservative party. The occasion was offered by the growth of Muslim population, and by the rise of international terrorism: in few years Lega Nord turned as the main anti-Islamic party within Italian political scenario, and the main actor in the conflict over mosques. Nonetheless, when Matteo Salvini won the leadership of the party, in 2013, its popularity was reaching an all-time low, given to a corruption scandal that involved Umberto Bossi himself. Salvini's leadership has been characterized by the strengthening of anti-Islamic resolutions, and in more recent times, by the discovery of Catholic establishmentarianism. Lega's comeback, that many observers expect to be fully achieved with the forthcoming elections, has been overwhelming. Should he win or not, Salvini's agenda has already profoundly affected Italian politics, for no candidate had expressed the intention to finally legislate in matters of religious liberty and on Muslims' right to worship.

This thesis has argued that human geography is called to offer a contribution by providing epistemic tools to oppose the rise of populism and establishmentarian politics. Islamophobia, I maintain, represents today one of the most serious threat to the cultivation of freedom. Rather than targeting only Muslim people, in fact, it institutes and normalizes the rationale for the repression of difference as well as for forms of neo-colonial dominion.

The discrimination of Muslims has two faces. On one side, Islamophobia has a pronounced political significance: it legitimates the forging of repressive devices that marginalize specific communities and limit their expression. Even though it has not been my specific object of analysis, this thesis has variously illustrated how the political marginalization of Islam is directly mirrored in space, in particular, in the ways non-Islamic contexts explicitly or implicitly sanction the presence of Muslims as alien to the urban. This is often proven in the conflict over mosques, that is, in the opposition to Muslims' right to the city. In extreme forms, Islamophobic policies can deny to Muslims the possibility to dispose of the space in which performing their own identity; in latent forms, spaces are provided, but these do not respond to the requirements of the community which uses them. As many have argued, Islamophobia is established in imaginaries: in the way identities and practices are perceived and thought, for generating and feeding political invisibility, stigmatization, or conflict.

On the other side, and consequentially, it is of epistemic significance: the reinforcement of confessionalist approaches or of cataphatic models of pluralism, explicitly or implicitly, grounds the

subordination of Islamic thought and of Muslims' subjectivities to the cognitive majority. It is important to underline that such a majority is characterised by the compresence of traits that might belong to Christianity as well as to secularism – and that, as I have briefly discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, secularism can have inherited from Christianity. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, while incapable of maintaining its promises for neutrality, secularism is particularly hostile to religious minorities, for it fails to be self-critical about the parochialism of secularized religious habits, values and structures of thought on what it conceives as neutral rationality. Both models of establishmentarianism, the one that finds its roots on a specific religious tradition and the one that pretends to expel the religious from the public realm, are to be opposed. What is needed, on the contrary, is a conception of the public in which an indefinite plurality of constituencies cooperate as equals, and are set free to nurture their own specificity. What is needed, in other words, is to conceive the public as the space in which difference is supported and even promoted, and in which every actor is invited to collaborate with the others to the definition of the common good, with the only requirement of accepting others' right of searching for truths. Intolerance cannot be tolerated; for this, we are all demanded to be self-critical about the subtle forms of epistemic intolerance we might enact while engaging with the religious other.

This thesis has held that postsecular thought must try to conceive new modalities of political cohabitation, by opening up the city to different polities and different images. The project of decolonizing aesthetics and pluralizing the political passes through that of desecularizing imagination. Once again, it is required a major self-awareness about the positionality towards which solutions are pronounced. What is required is to unlearn the solution we are accustomed to, and to find ways to promote the emerging of new ones. One example of good intentions gone wrong is that of interfaith spaces: these spaces are to be celebrated when they represent the genuine aspiration of communities moved by different creeds to cohabit the same premises and to enact shared practices; on the contrary, they are to be opposed when they are the product of specific policies or planning attitudes in reason of which communities are compelled to dialogue one another and to be inclusive. The imperative of interfaith dialogue and of interfaith space is one of the many imports of secularity, which is suspicious towards religious freedom and directly imbricated in its regulation. The solution I have proposed in this thesis is that of posing the principles of apophatic theology as an inspiration for pluralism. Apophatic pluralism proposes that, while we must be committed to the aspiration of building an open city in which interfaith interactions might happen, we must conceive this city as the coming together of a multiplicity of spaces in which groups are free to live and develop their *own* path to truth.

My point is that postsecular aspiration for including a plurality of metaphysics sensibilities in the public sphere can be achieved only when we dismiss affirmative claims about what the public is and what it should be, and about what religion is and what it should be. I have argued that postsecularism can be

fully pluralist and egalitarian, and potentially transformative, only when assuming apophasis as its grammatical rule. Apophatic pluralism, as I have discussed, is the application of the principle of negative theology to interreligious dialogue. This principle is that it is impossible to affirming any truth claim as final and normative for the whole humankind: this because the language through which we produce our own claims is ontologically fragile, incapable of fully rendering the contents it aims to re-present. Apophasis, a theological register present across every religious tradition, is a specific way of conceiving religion as nothing but a transitory and always incomplete step towards a reality that is in itself unknowable if not on the mutable terms advanced by the sensible experience – by the lived world and its geographies. The content of religion is the unsayable, what cannot be said; religion is what can be said, and its affirmations are posed in the terms in which the world has been manifest to different people in different times. Accordingly, apophatic pluralism suggests that, while every cataphatic claim must not be discarded or forced to be negative, as it is one of the ways through which humankind can approach ultimate questions, none of them can be assumed as *the one religion*.

My contention is that, while many models of pluralism cataphatically advance their own pretension of truth as the horizon to which other truth claims must conform, including prompted by postsecular scholars, apophatic pluralism offers the advantage of perpetually deconstructing the affirmative propositions it proceeds from. Nonuniversalizing and nonsubstantive, it provides a principle for rethinking the city as the coming together of a plurality of incommensurable particularities. Apophatic pluralism, I have maintained, is radically different from both methodological atheism and agnosticism. It does not suggest to legislate and live as if there were no God; instead, it suggests that our knowledge of God, whatever it might mean to different people, can be limited, can be improved, can be reinterpreted, and can be reformed. The emphasis here must be posed on *possibility*: these transformations might happen or not, and one cannot predict to any extent what their outcome would be. Every claim must be respected as final, and their adherents must be free to account it as such; what apophatic pluralism states is that, for they all express the unsayable, what we say cannot be conceived as valid for us all. For this, the religious other should be empowered to search for and express their own truth claims. One can say that such a model would hardly be accepted by orthodox religious members, and that this would make the whole model impossible to be achieved if not through posing more epistemic violence towards minorities. Another criticism would be that apophatic pluralism is in the end nothing but another version of liberal secularism, whose mechanism is another inclusivist attempt of naturalizing a specific epistemic position as *neutral*. While I fully recognize these critiques as challenging and pertinent, I must respond that my proposition is essentially the embryonic attempt of proposing a philosophical project for pluralizing our epistemic fields – primarily that of human geography and the social sciences. What it promotes is the perpetual research for self-criticism and plurality: if success could not be taken for granted, it is nonetheless paramount to try.

The second point I have advanced in this thesis is that, if we want to be attentive to the infinite variations of truth claims, to be respectful of difference and of its different tensions towards spatiality, it is needed to foster an epistemic sensibility capable of catching the ‘unsayable’ as it is felt: I argue that this sensibility is that of imagination. With imagination, I did not mean the individual faculty of *fantasy*. I rather have referred to an intermediate noetic faculty between sense-perception and intellection, and more than this, between a world in perpetual creation and our apprehension of it. This conception of imagination comes from a mystical reading of the Aristotelian tradition and of *nous poietikos*, radicalized by post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy. This approach argues for a theomonist cosmology, in which the unity of being self-disclose itself in a plurality of forms and loci – in a plurality of images. The senses operate in the world of bodies, in the world of the seen; this world is continuously crossed by the eruption of hierophanies, by manifestations of its transcendental unity, which is however unseen if not through the veils of the seen. Imagination, for it is the space between the materiality of the world as it sensed and the immateriality of pure intuition and thought, is the activity of spiritualizing the material and materializing the spiritual. In other words, imagination is a capacity that is both of the world manifesting itself, and of the creatural, that participate to the act of creation by contribution to the disclosing of images.

This thesis has argued that this conceptualization of imagination is particularly useful for a human geography inspired by postsecularism for two reasons. First, because it is capable of coming to terms with the tension between the seen and the unseen – that in this thesis has been defined as the duplicity of the real in *batin*, the inward and esoteric, and *ẓahir*, the outward and exoteric. Geography of religion, as it has been illustrated, finds its vocation in the study of the exoteric, for it mostly observes religion as a social form; more recent approaches try instead to de-materialize the religious, and to talk about it as the purely immaterial, that nonetheless becomes geographical when it is felt in the immanent body. My argument is instead that geography needs to address both the *batin* and the *ẓahir*. It needs to deal with the *batin*, because it is the realm in which the religious is experienced, felt and lived, and because it is its unreachable core. It equally needs to be attentive to the *ẓahir*, its outward expression – its physicality, its *mazāhir*, the names we cataphatically use to describe it, the symbols appearing for it to be contemplated. But more than anything, geography needs to be attentive to the unity of the two. Religion, as I have been demonstrating in this thesis, is nothing but the attempt of coming to terms with an unsayable process of worlding, in which we try to pronounce the unseen through the means provided by the seen. Without the unseen, we cannot see. In the words of Ibn ‘Arabi,

“The World of the Unseen is perceived through the eye of insight, just as the World of the Visible is perceived through the eye of sight. Sight perceives nothing of the World of the Visible except darkness, so long as the veil of darkneses or similar impediments are not lifted. Once the impediments are lifted and lights spread out upon the sensory objects, and

once the light of sight meets the light of the locus of manifestation, then the seer sees objects with sight. In the same way, the eye of insight is veiled by such things as rust (*rayn*), passion (*shahwa*), and gazing upon "others" (*aghyar*) within the dense natural world. These things come between it and the vision of the World of Dominion, that is, the World of the Unseen. But when man applies himself to the mirror of his heart and polishes it with invocation and the recitation of the Koran, he thereby gains some light. And God possesses a light called the "light of existence" which is deployed over all existent things. When these two lights come together, unseen things are unveiled as they are in themselves and as they occur in existence" (Chittick 1989: 223)

The importance of this principle is two-fold. On the one hand, if we are able to grasp the religious as the attempt of seeing the unseen through the seen, then we are able to admit – as Ibn ‘Arabi was – that for a plurality of loci of manifestation and of imaginative acts there is a plurality of different truth claims. On the other hand, it affirms that the sensuous experience of the world cannot be separated by the spiritual, and contextually, that spirituality can be elicited by the senses. This can be in turn applied on two levels: the first is that beauty and arts dispose of a spiritual dimension that the postsecular needs to discover and appreciate; second, that religious groups must be able to sensuously explore their own concepts of beauty and to give them spatial expression. Pragmatically, this principle should address postsecular planning, and suggest modes of engagement capable of pluralizing and decolonizing the modes of perception and expression of beauty in the city.

Second, imagination can help human geography to come to terms with the fact that every truth claims, be it conventionally religious or conventionally secular, is both the said and the unsayable. As it has been argued by Aristotle, imagination is a decisive capacity of the soul because it coordinates the essential faculties of a living body. Imagination mediates desire, appetite and repulsion, and for this it leads to deliberation and intellection. Nonetheless, the appearance of *phantasmata* can also be deceptive: it can substantiate error, false beliefs and misleading opinions that resist to knowledge. Imagination is the act through which senses and the discursive affect one another. Through this perspective of imagination, I have suggested, it is possible to better understand the limits of discursive reason and of the acts through which we try to positively say the unsayable.

Language is deceptive, and so is intelligence; only intuition and vision can lead to truth – Simone Weil says. Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss the fact that language is a crucial component of the human experience: that we say the unsayable, that we try to do so all the time; that we have opinions and we keep expressing them, all together, even though what we say is what we should instead try to be speechless about. We live in the world of bodies, and, as much as we try not to, we keep being in error, and we keep trying to be right, to do it right, to say it right. To think at our own experience in the world of bodies

through imagination offers an advantage: it makes us aware that whatever we are able to say, which is nothing but images, rather than through discursive reason and through a more persuasive argument, can be tackled only by other images – by other visions, by other intuitions. The resources through which our city can be changed have to be found in the disclosure of images. The capacity of doing so is what we call imagination.

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